



THE LAME WILL LEAP LIKE A DEER

SERIES: *THE SPREADING FLAME*

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Acts 3:1-26

Sixth Message

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The title of our series in the book of Acts is *The Spreading Flame*. This book, which records the birth, infancy, and adolescence of the church, is the story of the spreading flame of the Holy Spirit. Acts is all about the movement and advancement of God's kingdom, from a Jewish church centered in Jerusalem, with Peter as the leading figure, to a predominantly Gentile church, with Paul as the leading figure, and with Rome, the capital of the Gentile world, as the goal.

The theme of the book is given in 1:8. The Lord, speaking to his apostles, says: *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* Not only is this the agenda for the early church, it also provides a cursory outline for the book—a table of contents, if you will.

The first seven chapters of Acts describe the growth of the church in Jerusalem. At the beginning of chapter 8, the disciples are scattered. Chapters 8-12 describe the expansion of the church throughout Judea (the province around Jerusalem) and into Samaria, the Roman province just to the north. Chapters 13-28 describe the expansion of the church into Europe, the "remotest part of the earth."

The first two chapters of Acts, which give a glimpse of the church's beginnings, is a powerful and peaceful picture of the early church. It seems almost idyllic. Two thousand people responded to Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. They were forgiven, and received the Holy Spirit. They were conscientious in their learning from the apostles, their worship of God, their care for one another, and their witness to those outside their fellowship. Life was good. Everything was sweetness and light. The fruits of the Spirit were displayed daily: love, joy, and peace. The Holy Spirit seems to dominate these first two chapters.

But, beginning in chapter 3 and continuing through chapter 6, another main character, the devil, enters the scene. The devil's hostility toward the church is the main theme of this section. Although he is mentioned only once by name, his work is obvious in every chapter. In these texts we find Satan's strategy for destroying the church.

John Stott in his excellent commentary on Acts identifies three weapons that are used against the church in these early chapters of Acts.¹

The devil's first weapon is physical violence. He tries to crush the church by force. His second and even shrewder weapon is moral compromise. Unable to stop the church by means of outside force, he tries to destroy it by damaging its interior life. He attempts to introduce deceit and ruin the open, honest fellowship that is such a critical part of the life of the church. His third and most subtle weapon is distraction. He tries to sidetrack the apostles from their priority tasks of preaching and prayer, by preoccupying

them with social service. That was a very important ministry, but one to which they had not been called.

So there are the devil's three means of attack: persecution, or physical violence, compromise, and distraction. I am not an expert on the work of Satan, but I do know that he exists. It is naïve and dangerous to deny that. But, the devil is not very creative. He has not changed his strategy, tactics or weapons. If we are deceived, we have no excuse.

In chapters 3-4 and part of chapter 5, Luke writes about the first weapon, persecution. Although we will not find that opposition in our text this morning, it is a miracle, and Peter's sermon explaining the miraculous healing which follows, that aroused the opposition.

Verses 1-2 give the setting:

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer--at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. (Acts 3:1-2, NIV)

Peter and John go to the temple to participate in the afternoon sacrifices. After all, they were Jews. They still regarded themselves part of that historic promise that went all the way back to Abraham, so they continued to worship in the temple. They arrive for the three o'clock prayer service at the same time as this crippled man, who was carried there daily by his friends or relatives for the purpose of begging. The man picked a choice spot to beg. Luke calls it the Beautiful Gate, or Nicanor Gate, which, according to Josephus, was a huge double gate about 75 feet high and 65 feet wide. Made of brass and richly decorated with silver and gold, this entrance was the main Eastern Gate to the temple precincts from the Court of the Gentiles.

But at this beautiful gate there was an ugly sight. Luke, the good doctor, seems compelled to say that the man suffered from a congenital condition. Later on we learn that he was over 40 years old, that he was handicapped and needed to be carried everywhere. He had never walked in his life. Picture the sight of this impotent man against the backdrop of these magnificent surroundings. What a perfect place to solicit funds.

Now comes the divine encounter. In Acts 2 we learn that miracles were taking place at the hands of the apostles. We are about to encounter one of them.

When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

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." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. (3:3-7)

Seeing Peter and John, the beggar begins his perfunctory wail, repeated so many times before, "Gentlemen, just a few cents please." Peter fixes his gaze on the man and demands that he look at him. This aroused his expectations. If you see someone needy and you don't want to help, you try not to notice him. This is what most people did as they entered the temple. The man probably turned to Peter and John expecting to get something. So when Peter tells him, "I don't have a nickel to my name," he was probably taken aback. His eyes dropped, and he put down the cup he was holding out. He wasn't prepared for the rest of what Peter said: "but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, walk!"

The noteworthy thing in these verses is not Peter's faith or his authority, but his compassion: his eye contact, his loving touch. Peter doesn't stand back and watch the miracle take place; he leans forward and takes the man by the hand, helping him up. The man had never walked; he needed help and understanding. The scene reminds us of the way our Lord touched the leper before he healed him (Matt 8). In his commentary, John Stott quotes Thomas Walker, "The power was Christ's. But the hand was Peter's."²

He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. (3:8)

Some people see in this verse a marvelous description of the Christian life. It certainly is a tremendous fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 35:6: "Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy." I am not suggesting that we should jump around, but I hope there are times in your life when you do jump around for joy in Christ. I had that experience in Mexico recently, worshipping with hundreds of high school students in the dust and dirt. Likewise, when Christ heals our crippled and diseased spirits, that certainly is a reason for joy.

A crowd quickly gathers.

When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

While the beggar held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. (3:9-11)

They come running to what is called Solomon's Colonnade, situated at the Eastern end of the outer court of the temple. It consisted of a double row of marble columns with a cedar roof. Jesus frequently walked and taught here. Here was where he taught about the good shepherd (John 10).

Peter seizes the opportunity to preach. In chapter 2, he took the miracle of Pentecost as his text for his first sermon. Here, the healing of this crippled man becomes the opportunity for his second sermon.

The apostle begins by giving all the glory to Jesus.

When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?" (3:12)

Immediately Peter redirects their focus from the cripple to the Lord. "Why do you look at us? Why do you look at him?" he asks. "Look at Jesus!" The crowd keeps looking back and forth from the healed cripple to the apostles. But Peter redirects their attention to Christ. It was the name of Jesus Christ, not the apostle's power, that had healed him. It wasn't the apostle's holiness that had made him walk.

Peter continues,

"The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see. (3:13-16)

Many of those listening to Peter probably were part of the mob that shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" during Passover week. Yet Peter has the audacity, the courage, to say to them, "You killed him!" He is laying his life on the line. They could just as well have lynched him. Notice the contrast between the activity of men and the activity of God. It is the contrast between the regard that God gives to Jesus and the complete disregard these people had shown him. Peter repeats it for emphasis:

"You handed him over to be killed" (v 13);

"you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go" (v 13);

"You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you" (v 14);

"You killed the author of life" (v 15).

Peter doesn't pull any punches. He is saying, "You delivered Jesus over to Pilate, a pagan who didn't have any of your theological background or understanding of God's activity. Pilate was convinced of his innocence and tried to release him, but you denied him. You, the very ones who ought to have recognized him as the one sent from God, denied him. Instead you demanded that Barabbas, a murderer, be released. You murdered the Prince of Life and set free a murderer." How ironic. They set free a man who had taken life and killed the giver of life.

"You murdered the Messiah," says Peter. "You put to death the man upon whom God had put his seal of approval." As Paul describes it in another place, "You put to death the Lord of glory." That's how wise we are. We put to death the only good man who ever lived. We are like the silly men who killed the goose that laid the golden egg. Perhaps you are asking, "Why do you say 'we'?" It is because, if Jesus came to Cupertino in 2002, we would put him to death.

But God reversed the sentence of death. Peter reminds them again of the hard fact of Jesus' resurrection. "We saw it," he says, "we are witnesses of it." The power of their witness is that there is no ambiguity in it. They didn't say, "We think he was alive. He looked alive." They could say with certainty that Jesus was alive.

The resurrection is the unique thing about the Christian faith. It really happened. It wasn't a fraud or a hoax. It wasn't a spiritual resurrection. Jesus' body came out of that tomb and he walked the streets of Jerusalem. They saw him, they touched him, they ate with him. It wasn't mass hysteria. One of the incidental proofs of the resurrection of Christ is that Peter stood before the very people who put Jesus to death a few months earlier and said that Jesus rose from the dead, and no one challenged his words.

Jesus is alive today! The point of verse 16 is that this living Lord is the one who acted through the apostles to restore the crippled man. They knew that one of the marks of the Messiah is that he would heal the sick and raise the dead. Remember Isaiah's prophecy of the Messianic age: "Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy." Peter says, it is Jesus that is still at work among us.

The other striking element in Peter's words is the number of important facts given about Jesus in the titles he ascribes to him. In verse 6 he refers to him as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was a real man, not some imaginary philosophical figure. It was a Jesus they all knew, the man who lived in Nazareth and traveled about the country teaching and doing good.

Peter also calls him the Servant of God (v 13). They would understand that term from Isaiah 52-53. Peter was saying that this Jesus was the suffering servant who was "pierced for our transgressions" and "crushed for our iniquities." And then he was glorified. He is the "Holy and Righteous One." This is significant when you think of how often God is referred to in the Old Testament as the Holy One of Israel. In verse 15 Peter calls him the author of life. The word can mean pioneer or origin or source of life. Later on in the sermon, Peter refers to him as the "prophet foretold by Moses." All of these titles refer to the uniqueness of Jesus, the uniqueness of his suffering and glory, his character and life.

Next, Peter applies this message for his hearers.

"Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets." (3:17-21)

Peter says, "You acted in ignorance because you didn't know who Jesus was." Think about the events that surrounded the crucifixion. The multitudes shouting "Crucify him!" acted in ignorance. Caiaphas, Herod and Pilate acted in ignorance. The soldiers who nailed him to the cross acted in ignorance. Peter remembers our Lord's words from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they do not know

what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Peter isn't saying this to diminish what they had done or to excuse their guilt. It is simply meant to encourage them with the fact that forgiveness is possible. It brings to mind Numbers 15, where there is a distinction made between sins of presumption and sins of ignorance. Peter understands this; he was in the same boat himself. The word Luke uses for their disowning the Lord before Pilate (in v 13) is the same word used of Peter when he disowned or denied the Lord on the night of the crucifixion.

In these words we have the clear view that God sees man as ignorant and blind, carelessly stumbling in the darkness, not knowing what he is doing. But, although these people didn't know what they were doing, God knew. His purposes were being fulfilled all along. That is the grace of God—that through all of our blindness and folly, through all the foolishness of human life, God is still working out his purposes.

Peter's desire is not simply to arouse guilt, however, but to alleviate it. He gives a command, and then lists three things we will receive if we obey that command.

He is very direct in his counsel: "Repent, then, and turn to God" (v 19). Repentance is merely changing one's mind about something. Peter is not saying we must feel bad. We don't have to walk down the aisle crying over our sins. That isn't necessarily a bad thing, but repentance isn't feeling bad about oneself. The first thing we have to do to become a believer is to change our mind about Jesus. "You crucified him," says Peter. "You didn't believe he was who he claimed to be, whom God said he was, the Messiah. You need to change your mind about him." That is the same message we need to hear today. Becoming a Christian is not merely praying a prayer and asking Jesus to come into our life; it involves deciding to change the course of our life. Are we going to let Jesus be who he is, Lord and King, and let him rule our lives?

On the other hand, if you are a believer and you are instructed in the Word about something that you are doing that is contrary to the will of God, you need to change your mind. Admit that the way you are going is wrong and go in the other direction. Repent and turn around.

When we do this, Peter says three things happen. First, our sins will be wiped out (even their sin of putting to death the Author of life). That term wiped away means "to wash off, to erase, to obliterate." It is used in the book of Revelation both of God wiping away our tears and of Christ, who refuses to erase our name from the Book of Life. William Barclay comments that the ink used in ancient writing had no acid in it. As a result it didn't bite into the papyrus like modern ink; it simply lay on the surface. To erase the writing one might take a wet sponge and simply wipe it away.³ When God forgives our sins he wipes the slate clean. That is a beautiful picture.

I do not know anything more difficult than to get people to believe that. It is amazing how many Christians know that God forgives their sins: he blots them out, he deals with this great problem of guilt which is at the root of all human ill—and yet they do not believe it. They are still trying to work out some standing or merit before God. But Peter says that God arouses guilt only because he has the solution to it, and that is the blotting out of sins in the name of Jesus. Faith in the name of Jesus blots out your

sins.

We had a wonderful memorial service yesterday for Bill Bradley. I was struck again with this thought of forgiveness when Brian Morgan read from Psalm 130:

If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins,
O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness. (Ps 130:3-4a)

The second result is that times of refreshing may come from the Lord. It is hard to know exactly what Peter is referring to here, but I think the way it is written is the positive counterpart of forgiveness. God does not wipe away our sins without adding his refreshment for our spirits. The word can mean rest, relief, or refreshment. Remember what Jesus told the woman at the well: "whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14).

The final promise is that one day Jesus himself will return and make everything right. In this present time we live in the tension between the already and the not yet. We know God's forgiveness and experience his refreshment through the Spirit. But we also experience much groaning. In Romans, Paul says that we groan and creation groans, because we live in this fallen world. But one of these days that law of entropy is going to be reversed. Jesus himself will return to restore all things. Nature itself will be freed from bondage, and God will make a new heaven and earth. We wait patiently for that day.

These promises were all foretold in the Old Testament. So Peter concludes with more quotations and references.

"For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.'

"Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days. And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.' When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways." (3:22-26)

All of the prophets, Moses, Samuel and his successors, and Abraham, speak with one voice looking forward to these days. Peter quotes that foundational promise in Genesis 12, made to Abraham, "Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed." The entire Bible is a fulfillment of that promise. Jesus is that promised seed.

Peter declares that God has sent Jesus to bless us, to make us potent, to give us life, by turning us from our wicked ways. Do you know that God blesses us by turning us away from our sins? Holiness is a great blessing. It is in righteousness that the blessing of God is received.

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1. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), 89.
2. Stott, *Acts*, 91.
3. William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1955).