

Acts 3-4

University of Cumbria CU (Lancaster)

1st May 2008

Good evening to you all. I'll start by saying thanks for inviting me. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Gareth and I work for a small church in Southend-on-Sea in Essex. Which is about 230 miles away, but I'm delighted to be here.

Right, tonight we're looking at chapters 3 and 4 of Acts. As you'll see, it's huge, and time is tight, so I haven't really got time to ease you in with a humorous anecdote. So if you could just *assume* it would've been hilarious, we can dive straight in...

At this point, the main characters, the apostles, are still in Jerusalem, and most of what happens happens at the temple. We're still in the opening stages of the plan Jesus described to them in chapter 1v8, "*But you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*" That sentence is like a roadmap as the rest of the story of Acts unfolds. But here, we're just at the beginning. The Holy Spirit was poured out on them in chapter 2, with astonishing results, and the journey has begun. Things have started well - after Peter's first public speech, 3,000 people responded and became Christians! They must have been feeling pretty confident - everything is going great.

But then in these two chapters, things start to get tougher, and what happens next sets a pattern which continues for the rest of Acts, and in fact for the rest of history. At the heart of what happens in these chapters is a name – **Jesus Christ of Nazareth**. He is the message they're preaching. He's the focus of their success, it's the focus of their problems, and it's the focus of their life together.

As we look at these chapters, we're going to see 3 ways the gospel – the good news about Jesus Christ, who he is and what he's done, is central to their lives as God's people. As we do, I want us to see that the gospel should be central in our lives too. And if it is, it will change everything.

So, three ways the good news about Jesus affects the lives of the apostles...

1. **They Proclaim the Gospel**
2. **They are Persecuted for the Gospel**
3. **They Live out the Gospel**

They Proclaim the Gospel (Ch3)

At about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, Peter and John go to the temple to pray. When they get there, they see a man who can't walk. He was probably a familiar sight, having been there every day, probably for decades. When Peter sees him, he doesn't offer him silver or gold like everyone else; instead, the man is healed. **It's a miracle!**

I was careful not to say "*Peter heals him*" - Peter was careful not to say that either. He's clear that the man is healed in **Jesus' name**. Peter hasn't suddenly developed magical powers now he's received the Holy Spirit, and the word 'Jesus' isn't a magic spell. When Peter says the man is healed in *Jesus' name*, he is announcing that it is by Jesus power and authority that it happened. So this is more than Peter carrying on where Jesus left off. Jesus himself is continuing to work through the disciples.

Understandably, the miracle gets the attention of the crowd, who recognise the man from the temple gate. So Peter takes the opportunity to explain what has happened...

You might look at this talk that Peter gives, and be slightly puzzled how people could have been convinced by it – it's quite different to a talk you might get at CU, for example.

Obviously, the Holy Spirit was working through Peter, as He does whenever the gospel is preached. But we also have to remember **who** Peter is talking to. This is a group of Jews and other worshippers, who've been learning about God their whole lives. So there's a lot Peter doesn't *have* to say, because they know it already. So we have to try to read Peter's sermon like a first-century Jew from Jerusalem.

Peter tells them outright that Jesus is responsible for the miraculous healing, then he goes on to explain who this Jesus is (remembering that they're Jews). He makes direct reference to their God – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God their ancestors have worshipped for centuries. And then he gives Jesus different titles, which maybe don't seem significant to us, but which would have left a Jewish audience in no doubt what he was getting at. Peter calls him God's **servant** – the suffering servant was a key theme in the promises about the one God would send, and this servant, Jesus, was *glorified* by God! He calls Jesus the **Holy and Righteous One** and the **Author of Life** – honours reserved for God, but which Peter gives to Jesus.

At the same time, Peter shows them just how *stupid* they've been. This isn't that long after Jesus was crucified, so a lot of these people could well have been involved *directly* in Jesus' death. These people may well have been in the crowd literally shouting “Crucify Him!” So he shows how horrible their mistake was in light of the honour he gives to Jesus. They *delivered over* and *denied* the one God *glorified*, and who even Pilate had decided was innocent. They asked for a *murderer* to be released instead of the *Holy and Righteous One*! They *killed* the *Author of Life* (who God then raised from the dead)!

Imagine you were one of those Jews? “Oops!” doesn't really cut it, does it?!

They didn't know what they were doing, Peter says, but God did. They were fulfilling prophecy. Their own prophets foretold Jesus' coming and his inevitable suffering. And they declared both the restoration he'll bring when he returns, **and** the consequences of rejecting him. So “REPENT” Peter says - “turn back to God.” Turn back now, while you still can. Have your sins forgiven, so that you'll be restored too.

And what's the result? We're told in verse 4 of chapter 4, after they're arrested – **thousands become Christians!**

I saw a documentary recently where a jungle tribe were fishing with dynamite, and it reminded me of this. They lobbed a stick of dynamite into a lake, there was an explosion, and the fish jumped out of the lake. The name of **gospel is dynamite!** Peter just connects Jesus to what they already knew, and let the Holy Spirit do His stuff. There was an almighty bang as they realised, and a few thousand people leapt at the chance to repent!

An obvious question is: should you be disappointed that thousands don't become Christians whenever you have a lunchbar? The thing to remember with Acts (as I'm sure you were told if you were here for chapters 1 & 2) is that it was a unique situation, at a unique point in history. Peter has the unique opportunity to speak to people who had actually been taught the gospel for centuries – Peter just joins the dots.

What we do need to see is the necessity of proclaiming the name of the Lord Jesus, and that people need to repent. The miracle alone wouldn't have been enough. It was through proclaiming the

name of the Lord Jesus that people turned back to God. To be able to have “faith in his name” (v16), people need to know the name in the first place.

Peter geared what he said to his audience, and they were ready to hear it. But it was his **words**, used by the **Holy Spirit**, which people responded to. And you don't need to be an apostle to use words! What's critical is that you **proclaim the name**.

They are Persecuted for the Name (4v1-22)

Rather unsurprisingly, Peter's sermon gets him into trouble, either for political or theological reasons, or probably both. He and John are arrested and detained over night, and the next day they are taken before the council – the same council which had orchestrated the crucifixion of Jesus. How would you feel standing in front of them if you were a disciple?

Their question is a simple one – in whose name are you doing this? Peter speaks boldly and as bluntly as he had the day before: It is by Jesus Christ of Nazareth, **whom you crucified** and rejected, but who God raised from the dead and exalted. He's the fulfilment of prophecy, and the only way to salvation. **Outrageous** things to say in front of the highest religious authorities in the land!

But the council can't deny the miracle that's happened – the guy's right there in front of them. And so their response is slightly pathetic. They tell Peter and John to keep quiet and stop teaching in Jesus name. Peter and John tell them to get stuffed. They can't help but speak of what they've seen and heard. And so they go free.

Things were going so well, and then this happens! But we shouldn't be surprised at all. They knew that persecution would come – Christ promised it himself (Lk 12v11). But he also promised to **help** (Lk 12v12), a promise he kept when Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit as he spoke (4v8).

Peter and John could have given up there and then. They could have agreed to keep quiet and lived happy, quiet lives. But they couldn't. They couldn't help but talk about what they'd seen and heard, so they stayed true to the name, and they didn't tone it down or compromise. Persecution doesn't get in God's way – far from it. Thousands became Christians that day, and many more after. In fact, further down the line it's *persecution* which scatters witnesses across the world to fulfil the next stage of the plan.

When we think about our situation, it's tempting to either play down the persecution we're likely to face, or to make a huge deal out of it. But either way, we shouldn't feel like victims – persecution doesn't get in the way of God's purposes. Some people will always react badly.

There's an understandable temptation to **tone things down, miss out unpopular bits**, or to **just do nice things for people** (which tends to get a much better reaction). In fact, the only sure-fire way to get rid of opposition is to get rid of the gospel. But that **wasn't** what Peter and John did. Look back at **4v12**. *Do you believe that?* Peter and John were *convinced* that Jesus is the only way to salvation, and so they couldn't help speaking about him, and they were completely unwilling to compromise. If we believe 4v12 is true, then we shouldn't be willing to compromise either. And the promise Jesus made, that he'd help them when the time came, applies to us too.

They Live for the Name (4v23-37)

Rather than compromising or retreating, Peter and John model the right response for us. These events drive them to prayer. Notice some key things about their prayer:

Firstly, do you notice what that they **don't** pray for? They don't pray that the persecution will go away. As I've said, the only way to get rid of negative reactions is to get rid of the gospel! It

doesn't even enter their heads to ask God to remove the persecution.

Instead, they put their persecution into perspective, by reminding themselves who God is. He is **sovereign (v24)** – he's in control. They look to the **testimony of creation** – God created everything, including the people and situation they're facing. They remember the **testimony of scripture (v25)** – God and his people are no strangers to persecution. They recall the **testimony of Jesus' life (v27)** – Jesus himself underwent persecution from God's people and from those outside. And, based on all that, they pray for **more** proclamation, for continued boldness and for signs and wonders in Jesus' name. God answers! The room is shaken as they are filled with the Holy Spirit, and they speak with boldness.

This should be both a **challenge** and an **encouragement** to those of us who are Christians. We should be **challenged** over our priorities. When we come up against difficulties because we're Christians, where do our thoughts immediately turn? Do we react with “please make them stop God,” or “please don't let this stop the gospel”? I think you know which one it *should* be...

But the things which **encouraged** the believers should encourage us too. God IS sovereign, whatever situation we find ourselves in. And we have just as much reason to cling to him when things get rough. Plus, we have 2000 years of church history to encourage us too. For hundreds and hundreds of years, the church has been persecuted, God has been faithful, and we're still here!

The result was a community of believers united by Christ – united by the name we've been talking about all night. The way they lived together demonstrates it in a real way. He gave up everything to make them right with God, and they displayed that same attitude in how they cared for each other, and in proclaiming Jesus to others.

What does this look like for us?

The first thing I want to say is that, if you're not a Christian, there is only one way that this applies to you. You need to trust this Jesus Peter has been talking about. Without that, if you haven't got Jesus at the centre of things, anything else I say is pointless because it won't sort things out between you and God. If everything Peter says is true, if Jesus is who Peter claims he is, then you need to turn to him. You might need to find out more, and the Christian Union will fall over themselves to help you. But, “there is salvation in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

If you **are** living with Jesus at the centre of your life, like the first Christians were, then it will show. It will be shown in how you live, as you proclaim the name, and as you care for each other with the same attitude Christ had towards us. You won't be able to help speaking about what you've seen and heard. The name **has** to be made **public**. That simple-but-revolutionary idea underlies and over-arches everything else the first Christians said and did. It's the key to this chapter and to the whole of Acts (so you'd better make sure you get it now!). Threats and orders didn't shut **them** up, and they won't shut **us** up. **Acts** is an account of the gospel spreading out to every corner of the earth. And the exciting thing is, it's still carrying on. We're part of it, right here, right now!

And why does it carry on? It carries on because of a the gospel, because of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. It carries on because, “there is salvation in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”