

## ALMS AND LEGS- A WONDER AND A WORD

### Acts 3

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9<sup>th</sup> June 2019



The book of Acts is all about having the power of the Spirit to witness for Jesus. But it's not easy is it? How do you bring up a discussion about Jesus in a natural way with friends or workmates? How do you cope with negative reactions? That's one of the hardest things isn't it? We all want to be liked. In Australia that's more likely if you keep your religion to yourself. So as Christians we are subtly enculturated to keep quiet. Which we often do because no one likes opposition. But we must face the fact that as Christians opposition may well be our part of our lot. It's certainly what the early church faced. In Acts 2:42-47 we saw the ideal picture of the new church. They were devoted to the Word of God, devoted to each other and sharing things as people had need. And they *"enjoyed the favour of all the people"*. But it didn't stay that way. They soon faced opposition. It all started with the miracle at the temple here in our text. It drew a crowd, Peter preached about Jesus and soon the temple guard had Peter and John arrested. Chapter 4 is about them being interrogated by the Sanhedrin, and how they stood up to it all by the power of the Spirit. We will get into that next week. Today we look at where the opposition started: with the miracle of what I have called 'alms and legs'.

Luke in Chapter 2:43 spoke of *"Everyone was filled with awe and many miraculous signs were done by the apostles."* Well, of all those miracles Luke now selects one to tell us about. (Acts 3:1) *"One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer-at three in the afternoon."* Peter and John, like the early Christians went to the temple on a regular basis as they always had. On this day they came across a man over 40 (4:21), 'crippled from birth'. Now why hadn't Jesus healed him. Jesus had gone to the temple often and must have seen him there. Jesus didn't heal everyone, but each miracle was done when it was God's time and purpose. Peter and John must have also come across him often. Well on this afternoon it was God's time and purpose. The crippled beggar asked them for money. Look at what Peter and John do. (Acts 3: 4 &5) *"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"*. Ever wonder why Peter did that, getting the man's attention and expectancy? Why not just tap him on the shoulder and heal him that way? Peter followed Jesus' example of involving the person's faith, creating the expectation for God to act. One commentator says so often people come to church

and expect nothing to happen. People don't grow spiritually because there is no real expectation that God is present and will do something with his people. What do we expect God will do this morning? Will he inspire us, disturb us, comfort us, reveal his love and grace, empower us to witness?

The cripple looked with expectancy, but for the wrong thing. He thought he would just get some more money; the usual 'alms for the poor'. But what God gave was beyond all expectation. Peter said 'Sorry, I've got no money. But I'll give you what I do have'. (Acts 3:6) *"In the Name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk"*. And he did. The way Luke describes it he was jumping around and walking, praising God. He was a cripple no more. And he was making the most of it, yelling in praise of God. Of course, you can imagine the result. A huge crowd gathered, because this cripple was well known. For decades he had been sitting at the temple gate. Thousands of people had gone by him year after year. As the massive crowd gathered at Solomon's Colonnade it gave Peter a group to preach to. Now, that is the whole point of the miracle at that time. We asked at the beginning how we get an opening to talk about Jesus? Well, God provides the opportunity. Do you see the pattern here? In Acts 2 the Spirit was poured out and it drew a huge crowd that Peter preached to. Now we see it again in Acts 3. A well-known cripple was jumping around for joy and a huge crowd gathered wondering what happened. So Peter told them.

That is what witnessing is about. It's not confronting someone and rattling off something you have memorised. It is telling your own story, when the opportunity arises. A mate wonders how you coped with a difficulty in your life and you witness to how God helped you through it. A person notices the change in lifestyle of a friend who was converted and wants to know why? Well, you witness to what Jesus has done for you, how you have experienced the joy of forgiveness. Witnessing is about using the God provided opportunities to tell what God has done. It's about explaining the events. This is what we see Peter doing. The beggar was standing up and hanging onto Peter and John. He is so taken by what has happened he won't let them go! He is the draw card and is himself a live introduction to a sermon.

Notice how Peter addresses the crowd: *"Men of Israel..."* He knows his audience. Peter knows who they are, their history, their spiritual journey. He targets what he says to that background. The key thing Peter says in both this sermon and his sermon in Acts 2 is Jesus. He focuses on Jesus being God's son, being crucified, risen from the dead and exalted to God's right hand. And Peter couches all he says in terms of the Jews' own history, their knowledge of the Old Testament scripture, their well-known prophets. It is interesting that when Steven spoke to his accusers in the Sanhedrin in Acts 7, he

does a very similar thing. But when Paul spoke to the Greeks in Athens, in Acts 17, he still spoke of Jesus and his resurrection, but nothing of Jewish history or the Old Testament. He spoke from the Greek context and their history and spiritual journey. So, for us, when we speak to friends, we do so from their situation, in the language and concepts they know.

Let's look at how Peter goes about speaking to the crowd (Acts 3:12). *"Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?"* In other words, 'Come on guys, you should know better. You ought to know that God is this sort of God. Have you forgotten your own history; what awesome things God has done for us?' Having established this miracle as God's work, Peter explains what it means. God did this to *"glorify his servant Jesus"*. In other words, he says: 'This miracle we have all just experienced proves Jesus is Lord'. And then he recounts what recently happened. (Acts 3:13-15) *"You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he 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."* These are strong words, but true to the facts! Notice the ways Jesus is described: *"servant of God...Holy & Righteous One... author of life..."* They are all Old Testament descriptions of the Messiah. Peter is telling them straight; you crucified your own God and Saviour.

Now, we have said that Christianity rests upon facts. And here Peter gives a series of unquestionable facts. They are things his audience themselves had been involved in. Notice the contrast between the acts of God and the acts of the people. God glorified his servant, but they delivered Jesus to be crucified. They denied the giver of life and wanted a murderer. They killed the author of life, but God raised him up from the dead. God has indeed done this as Peter strongly says, *"We are witnesses of this"*. Now this is striking because once again we see that the Christian faith rests upon well attested, well documented facts. It is not a religion just of ideas, or sentimental hopes. It rests upon facts. Facts that can be attested to by witnesses in court. These things happened and these people cannot deny it.

Do you see what Peter does? He tells it, as it is, to bring about a deep conviction of guilt. When we witness to others about Jesus, at some point, we need to make it very clear why Jesus came and why he died. It's not enough to say Jesus was a good person and we are to try and be good as well. Our sin also caused Jesus' death. The death and resurrection of Jesus are crucial to the gospel message. It's not about us judging others. It's about making people understand the underlying cause for all the wrong in the world. Yes, there are issues of injustice and economic inequity, natural disasters and

disease. But underlying all of that is our broken relationship with God. In a world where so many avoid taking responsibility, we all need to face up to God and say 'I am sorry. God, I have ignored and failed you. I was wrong. Please forgive me!' Without genuine conviction of guilt, without deep and true repentance we will not taste the joy of what God gives in his grace.

Now Peter does not leave them in their guilt. Accusing people without the context of grace drives them to fear, or resentment and bitterness. Peter refers back to the miracle, the healed cripple and says (Acts 3:16) *"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."* What does Peter mean with this? Well, he is demonstrating the reaction of God to the guilt of the crippled man. Sure, he was handicapped and had suffered. But he was still as guilty as the rest. He too was part of the crowd that cried out *"Crucify him"*. Yet he stands before them in perfect health, made whole by God's power in Jesus' name. Says Peter, in effect, the only thing that made God do this wonderful thing in his life, had nothing to do with what the man did, but simply his faith in Jesus. This is what Peter is getting at. He says in this miracle God is demonstrating for you how he reacts to human guilt. He reacts in love and grace on the basis of what Jesus went through. There we see God's grace and irony. He takes the sin of the people, their involvement in the crucifixion of Jesus and turns it into the way of forgiveness and life. This man is God's 'Exhibit A' right before their eyes: *"...as you can all see"*.

So, with that word of grace Peter calls on the crowd to *"Repent and turn to God..."* And he gives three promises for what will happen to them if they do. (Acts 3:19-21) *"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..."* The first promise is forgiveness. Peter's language is graphic: *"so that your sins may be wiped out..."* In Peter's day people wrote on papyrus with an ink that had no acid in it. The result was it dried and sat on the paper without biting into it. It meant you could just get a wet cloth and wipe it all off. Swish and it was gone. Repent, and your sins are wiped out. What a wonderful picture!

The second promise refers to *"times of refreshment"*. Because of sin we are often spiritually dry, there is little sense of peace and joy. Our guilt, our shame, gnaw away at our insides. But when we turn to Jesus, we come to know God and know we are right with God. Talk to people who have been converted and let them tell you of the joy and sense of purpose that came into their lives. The third promise is that Jesus will return.

When he does God will *"restore everything..."* All the stuff that makes life so hard now, the sickness and suffering, the lying and abuse, the war and terror, the pollution and storm, all will be gone as God recreates everything to the way it should be. That too is what we tell people in our stories as we witness. 'Here is how I cope and have joy in my life. I know God loves me. Yes, me personally, because I am forgiven of everything. I have a deep sense of joy, even in the tough stuff. It's like a deep refreshing well I so often draw from. With that I feel refreshed and able to tackle life. I am positive because I know that Jesus is coming to make all things good again. That is my hope. This is not just a pipe dream. These are things I am a witness to in my own life.'

Peter finished his sermon by quoting Moses and referring to Samuel and Abraham. He demonstrated that Jesus was the fulfilment of the whole Old Testament. And then he pointed out (Acts 3:26) *"When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each from your wicked ways."* Peter's crowd of Jews were some of the first to hear what God had done through the resurrection of Jesus. 2000 of them were converted that day. Today people are still given the opportunity to hear the gospel. Conversions might be slow in Australia. But they are coming to Jesus by the millions in China. Will you be part of this witnessing about Jesus? Remember God will provide the opportunities for you to witness. There will be those who want to hear more, and others who will oppose you. Don't be surprised if that happens. Our role is not to convince or judge, but to witness in the power of the Spirit. Let's be faithful to our calling.