

IV. The Progress of the Kingdom – Jerusalem and Judea

The balance of the book of Acts records the progress of the new creational kingdom inaugurated at Pentecost. At the outset, it is important to observe that Luke's narrative has an alternating structure, moving back and forth from a consideration of the Church's outward mission to its internal life as God's new household of faith. The appropriateness of this narrative structure is evident in the fact that these two dynamics – the Church's life and mission – function together in reciprocal fashion to promote the progress of Christ's kingdom in the world, and Luke constructed his account as an historical record of this progress. The reciprocal relationship of the Church's internal life and external mission is summarized as follows:

- The Church's authentic existence is the ground and impetus of its external mission. Its gospel witness *to* the world is the inherent fruit of its existence *in* the world. Individually and collectively, Christians are the fragrance of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:14-17).
- But this mission, in turn, is the engine by which the Spirit builds the Church – first in terms of adding to its numbers, but also in terms of its progress into maturity. The former is associated more with the Church's *success* in mission; the latter with the *opposition* that gospel mission encounters. Being the fragrance of Christ, the Church is, to some, the aroma of life unto life, but to others the stench of death unto death.

A. Jewish Mission and the Onset of Jewish Opposition (3:1-4:31)

Luke's description of the early Jerusalem Church provides the transition into the next section of his account (3:1-4:31). This section is important in that it recounts the first negative encounter between the apostles and Israel's religious authorities. Luke ended chapter two by noting that the Church – under the leadership of the apostles – enjoyed favor with all the people; he then immediately turned his attention to another public incident involving Peter, this one culminating in his imprisonment. Though it ended differently, this episode had important similarities to Pentecost – similarities which highlight thematic emphases in Luke's account (particularly the centrality of gospel speeches to the structure, flow and development of his narrative).

- First of all, the incident of chapter three also involved a public spectacle associated with a supernatural manifestation of the Spirit. At Pentecost, the Spirit had drawn together a crowd by the phenomenon of tongues-speaking; here He did so by publicly healing a man who had been lame from birth (3:1-11). This individual had an obvious birth defect (3:7) and he was well known in Jerusalem since he was placed daily by one of the temple gates in order to solicit alms from passersby. Virtually every Jew went up to the temple at some time or another, making this man one of the most recognized individuals in Israel.

The fact that this man was well-known was crucially important to the Spirit's purpose in healing him. Because this man was a fixture at the temple, everyone was aware of him and his crippled condition (3:9-10). Not only would the news of his healing spread quickly, no one would be able to question that a bona fide miracle had occurred (3:16). The one who had begged at the Beautiful Gate day after day was now attracting a crowd by leaping about and shouting praises to the God of Israel while Peter and John stood by.

- Secondly, this manifestation of the Spirit facilitated another public proclamation of Christ and His gospel. As at Pentecost, Peter seized the opportunity provided by an astounded group of onlookers to explain what they were witnessing and its implications for them (3:12ff; cf. esp. 2:21, 38 with 3:6, 19). Peter's message closely followed his Pentecost sermon, highlighting the parallel truths of Israel's culpability in Christ's death and Yahweh's overarching purpose in it. Once again Peter emphasized the Christ event as a matter of scriptural fulfillment, this time specifically with respect to Moses and Abraham.

By highlighting these particular portions of Peter's sermons, Luke was able to demonstrate and clarify how it is that all the Scripture finds its fulfillment and meaning in relation to Jesus Christ. Whether the prophetic promise of the Spirit, David and the Davidic Covenant, the priest-king Melchizedek, Moses, or Abraham and his covenant, every biblical facet of salvation history ultimately points to and converges in Christ.

At the same time, there are notable differences between the Pentecost event and the present episode involving the lame man.

- The most important is the negative outcome of the latter. Again, this account introduces the dynamic of Jewish hostility and opposition that is central to the plot line of Acts from this point forward. If the primary concern of the book is to demonstrate the fulfillment of Jesus' pledge of global witness and ingathering (1:4ff), that fulfillment was directly facilitated by Jewish unbelief and opposition to the gospel. Beginning with Peter's speech in the presence of the temple authorities, the outward reach of the ministry of the gospel was driven by Israel's fierce and relentless antagonism toward it.
- Another difference in the two events was also mentioned above, namely the different emphases of the two sermons. The reason for this is the different supernatural phenomena the sermons answered to. In the instance of Pentecost, Peter's speech addressed the manifestation of tongues; here he was commenting on a miraculous healing. Thus his first sermon focused on the Spirit's outpouring and its significance in salvation history, while the present one (3:12-26) focuses on the principles of renewal and restoration which characterize the inaugurated messianic age (the age of the Spirit). As interpreted by Peter, the miracle of physical healing and wholeness spoke of its greater spiritual counterpart.

In the end, both the commonalities and the differences associated with these two episodes highlight the heart of the gospel: the new creation in Jesus Christ in fulfillment of the Scriptures.

1. Peter's work of healing and subsequent speech to the gathered multitude are notable first in that they arose from normal, everyday circumstance. He didn't go out into the streets of Jerusalem with the intent to perform a miracle in order to gain the attention of a crowd to whom he could then proclaim Jesus and His gospel. He and John were simply going up to the temple at the time of the afternoon prayers, a practice that likely was part of their regular routine. They had no way of knowing what they were about to encounter and what would come of it – either that very day or in the weeks and months ahead. Peter and John didn't know, but the Spirit did, and He was poised for another public manifestation of power unto the proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth (ref. again John 15:26, 16:13-15).

When Peter and John arrived at the Beautiful Gate they encountered the crippled man they had probably walked past numerous times before. That day, too, he cried out to them seeking alms, but this time Peter was moved by the Spirit to provide something to him that previously he had not possessed; Peter had no alms to offer the lame man, but he could give him what the Spirit had entrusted to him: He could minister to him restoration and wholeness through the name and power of Jesus Christ (3:1-6).

During his earthly ministry Jesus had performed many such miraculous signs. These had certified His identity as Yahweh's promised Messiah, leaving Israel without excuse for its unbelief (ref. again Acts 2:22; John 10:22-25, 15:20-25). But being prophetic and messianic, these physical signs also pointed to their spiritual counterparts: *Jesus hadn't come into the world to cure men's physical ailments and alleviate their temporal predicaments; He came to conquer and destroy the curse and the one who secured it* (cf. Matthew 8:14-17 with 1 Peter 2:24-25; also Isaiah 42:1-7; Matthew 11:1-5; John 9:1-41).

- Jesus accomplished His triumphal victory and has taken His seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high. And from His throne He has sent His Spirit to begin the work of renewing the image-sons as the firstfruits of the redeemed creation.
- But the Spirit has become functionally the *Spirit of Christ* (Romans 8:9-10), so that He represents Jesus' abiding presence in the world (John 14:16-18).
- Accordingly, He continues to manifest the same works of supernatural power that Jesus performed, but He does so through Jesus' appointed ambassadors.

The Father had attested His Son by "signs and wonders," and now He was doing the same thing through those chosen to represent Him and His gospel in the world. Jesus had promised His disciples that they would do His works and greater as a result of His sending the Spirit (John 14:12); that day had come and Jesus' witnesses were now fulfilling their mandate, in the power of the Spirit, of testifying of Him and His work of renewal and transformation (cf. 2:15-19 with 2:43, 4:23-33, 5:12-15, 6:1-8, 8:1-6, 14:1-3, 15:1-12; cf. also Romans 15:14-19; 2 Corinthians 12:11-12; Hebrews 2:1-4).

Thus, in this passage Luke was highlighting another stream of biblical fulfillment in relation to Jesus and His work – a stream that builds upon the one emphasized in the Pentecost account. There Peter focused on the fact that the messianic kingdom was inaugurated with the coronation of David's Son, and His glorification in the heavenlies is attested and finds its present earthly expression in the manifest power of His Spirit. Jesus is enthroned as the conqueror of the serpent and the curse, *and now He has sent His Spirit to begin the work of liberating their captives*. This is the focus of Peter's second sermon.

The final goal in overthrowing tyranny is the liberation and restoration of those held in its grip, but that work cannot commence until the tyrannizing power has been broken. So it is in earthly conflicts, and so it is with the heavenly one. The Pentecost event and sermon stressed the triumph of Eve's Seed; the present episode highlights His subsequent work of plundering the Serpent's house (Matthew 12:22-29; cf. John 12:31-32).

- a. Again, it cannot be overemphasized that Luke’s purpose in his account is to demonstrate the fact that all the Scripture – being the inspired record of salvation history – finds its fulfillment and meaning in Jesus Christ. A person cannot truly understand Jesus, His work, and its outcome (both now and in the age to come) unless and until he discerns those things as they were promised, portrayed, and prepared for in the preceding salvation history recorded in the Old Testament scriptures. This means that an informed salvation-historical perspective and framework are necessary for correctly interpreting the present passage – both the miracle itself and Peter’s commentary which follows upon it. The absence of such a perspective and framework virtually insures that the reader will fall short in discerning Luke’s intention and the ultimate significance of this episode.
- b. As with the Pentecost phenomenon, certain Christian groups look to Peter’s healing act as reinforcing the notion that the Church is empowered and called to heal physical infirmities. If Pentecost established the norm of speaking in tongues, this miracle does the same for the gift of healing. More broadly, these and other supernatural phenomena recounted in Acts are said to affirm the perpetuity of “signs and wonders” in the Church. Such phenomena did attend the apostolic ministry, but specifically in relation to the dynamic of promise/fulfillment and the transition from the former preparatory age to the new eschatological age.

Examining the contexts for the signs and wonders recorded in the book of Acts – along with the commentary on these phenomena in the epistles – shows that they served the express purpose of affirming the apostolic gospel. The reason this was necessary is that widespread witness to the Christ event in the absence of personal knowledge of it or a written record demanded some form of authentication. Here were men going about proclaiming strange occurrences difficult to believe, and all the more so in light of the import attached to them by these witnesses. If the Jews struggled to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, how much more the Gentiles who had no connection to the Hebrew Scriptures and the person of Jesus of Nazareth? God authenticated the apostolic message by enabling these witnesses to perform mighty signs; now that men have the apostolic word recorded and authenticated in the New Testament scriptures, supernatural signs are no longer needed.

- c. Among Christians who believe that the miraculous gifts have ceased, many are guilty of the same error as those who contend that such gifts continue throughout the Church age. That error is the failure to recognize that the Spirit’s physical miracles were testimonial and prophetic *signs*, and therefore *non-ultimate* (ref. 4:22). Not an end in themselves, they were “signifiers” pointing to the ultimate realities of creational renewal and restoration which define the messianic kingdom and which will be consummately realized at Jesus’ return (cf. 3:8 with Isaiah 35:1-6; cf. also Luke 7:18-23 and John 9). Peter makes this clear by relating the lame man’s physical restoration to the spiritual matters of “healing” from sin (3:19a) and the refreshing and restoration that are found in Christ (so also the opposite of this restoration for those who reject Him, namely the “cutting off” that is spiritual separation and desolation) (3:19b-23; cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:6ff).