

“THROUGH THE BIBLE”

PASTOR SANDY ADAMS

ACTS 2:40-4:31

When the Billy Graham Crusade came to Montgomery, Alabama in 1965 Dr. Graham insisted that the choir be integrated with both blacks and whites. A local newspaper responded with a bigoted editorial. It complained that Graham was trying to set the church back a hundred years. Billy replied, "If that's the case, I've failed in my mission. I intend to set it back 2000 years."

The earliest church wasn't a perfect church, but they possessed the key ingredients all churches need. In Acts 4:32 we're told God blessed the church with "great grace" and "great power." Tonight we'll read about both...

Last time we saw how the Father poured out His long awaited promise. At Pentecost, the sound of a rushing wind, and flickers of fire accompanied the baptism of the Holy Spirit on the 120 disciples gathered in the upper room. Peter stood and provided the crowd a biblical explanation of what had happened. He then followed with a sermon that "cut to the heart." His listeners begged Peter, "what must we do?" Peter's answer was to "repent..."

And that's where we pick up this week, in 2:40, "And with many other words (Peter) testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them." Wow, what a great start to a church – the first day 3000 souls were saved!

But notice what they were saved from... We usually think we're saved from sin – and sin's effects – but Peter's view of salvation was much broader. Peter exhorted his listeners "Be saved from this perverse generation." There is a spirit within the culture from which we need to be saved. Since all humans are born in sin, every new generation is tainted with a "perverse" or "twisted" nature. It's displayed in different ways from generation to generation, but rebellion - independence from God - underlies the culture. Peter saw salvation in Christ as a way to escape this surrounding twistedness. When we're saved we transfer citizenship from man's kingdom to God's kingdom. We're saved to live together with a new set of values.

Verse 42 outlines the agenda of the early church. Here's what occupied the early Christians. "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." Church life didn't revolve around *committee meetings*, and *political rallies*, and *social clubs*... Notice Luke doesn't mention *softball leagues*, or *Zumba classes*, or *Weight Watchers*... although I'm sure all those activities have their place. What strikes me about life in the early church is that it was **simple** and **spiritual**.

The life of the early church swirled around four basic activities... First, **they delved into the Scriptures**. They taught and studied the Bible. Second, **they fellowshiped and spent quality time with each other**. Their emphasize was knowing and being known - loving and being loved. Third, **they broke bread, or took communion**. They worshipped God. And fourth, **they prayed**. The church that prays together stays together. That's it! The church calendar wasn't full of superfluous, temporary stuff. They were all about big ideas - Word and worship, fellowship and prayer. Here's an outline... ***They learned of God, loved God, shared God, spoke with God – and they did it all together!*** The church was all about God!

And noticed the results of sticking to their agenda... **“Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.”** The church and its members had respect. They were seen as genuine. Sadly, many churches today seem to have lost the public's respect. We've majored on the minors, and adopted worldly attitudes and methods. When we stick to God's agenda we'll regain the world's respect. And God validated their faith by working **“wonders and signs.”** When a church is sincere God sanctions it with the miraculous and supernatural.

And there was great love. Verse 44, **“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.”** Spiritually speaking, this demonstrates the caring and generosity that existed in the early church. It's easy to talk about being a spiritual family, but the church in Acts put their money where they mouth was – they pooled their resources to meet each other's needs. *If Jesus gave to us – how can we not give to each other.* Some observers have called the early church the first expression of *communism*. Not so! This was **common-ism** - not *communism*. Communism is forced sharing. Here, they freely and voluntarily combined their resources.

Actually, there may've been a better way to meet each other's needs. Later, when famine strikes Judea the Gentile churches are asked to collect an offering for the church at Jerusalem. It could be their abandonment of personal property and ownership crippled their ability to weather the storm. God never *commands* us to pool our resources – *only to show love and be generous*. Their **common-ism** might not have been the best strategy.

Verse 46, **“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people.”** I've heard it put, **“A healthy church will be growing larger and smaller at the same time.”** This was the dynamic combination that existed in the Acts church. On the one hand they enjoyed the excitement generated by a large meeting with lots of people. This occurred in the Temple. But they also cultivated more intimate fellowship in small groups as they met from house to house. This is the combination needed to produce optimal spiritual growth. This is what we're capturing at CCSM between our **Sunday morning celebration** (*the large group*) and our **weekly TBGs** (*the smaller group*).

And notice the results. **“And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”** *The Lord added.* There was no striving on the church's part. No programs or pushes. It was just God's supernatural work. I believe **“When any church becomes a healthy church God will add to that church.”**

Chapter 3, “Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.” Or 9 AM. Remember Peter and John were Jews, as were all the first Christians, and they were still living under Jewish custom. One of the Jewish rituals was to pray for an hour in the Temple three times a day - at 9 AM, noon, and 3 PM. Devout Jews living in Jerusalem suspended their normal activities and came to the Temple for these times of prayer.

“And a certain man lame from his mother’s womb (he’d been crippled since birth) was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms from those who entered the temple...” Sadly, there weren’t many vocational training programs for handicapped people in first century Jerusalem. All a paralytic could do was beg. So every morning this man’s friends would put him on a stretcher, cart him to the Temple, lay him down by the gate, and let him beg the day away. And notice they placed him strategically at the *Gate Beautiful*. This was the entrance into the Inner Court. This spot got the most traffic in the Temple. Just inside the gate were the 13 trumpet-shaped offering boxes. The beggar was hoping to catch devout Jews while they had a few coins in their hand.

Verse 3 speaks of the lame man, “who, seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked for alms. And fixing his eyes on him, with John, Peter said, “Look at us.” So he gave them his attention, expecting to receive something from them.” Understand this man was a professional beggar - he was as calloused toward the people walking by as the people were to him. He never looked into anyone’s eyes. His head hung down. He looked only for expensive sandals. He’d see a pair and shake his cup in their direction. And the worshippers were as oblivious to him as he was to them. They may’ve dropped a coin in his cup, but they never locked eyes with him either. What was it that caused Peter to “fix his eyes” on the beggar? Perhaps a dozen beggars worked this spot in the Temple. Why did Peter lock onto him? I’m sure it was a mixture... *of love, the Spirit’s leading, his own openness, the gift of faith...* Suddenly, Peter felt a tug in this crippled man’s direction.

“Then Peter said, “Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.” Earlier Peter and John had sold all their possessions and pooled them together with other believers. He no longer had any silver and gold of his own. One day the Pope was counting the money in the church coffers when Thomas Aquinas entered the room. The Pope pointed to his cache of gold and jewels, “Thomas, we can no longer say, ‘silver and gold have I none?’” Aquinas responded, “Yes, and neither can we say, ‘in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk.’” It’s a sad indictment against the church when we substitute *prosperity for power*, and put more trust in *money than miracles*. No amount of money can buy what we need most – the power of the Spirit.

“And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength.” In the Greek, the wording used by Dr. Luke implies this man’s inability to walk was due to severely dislocated ankles. That’s where the healing occurred in *“his feet and ankle bones.”*

Whenever I read this passage I always marvel at Peter’s faith. Peter was a man like you and I. Imagine the thoughts that raced through his mind just before he grabbed this man’s hand. *“What if he doesn’t stand up?” “What if his legs collapse?” “If this doesn’t work I’ll be accused of humiliating a handicapped guy.”* A thousand “what ifs” bombarded him.

Yet, Peter felt the leading of the Holy Spirit so strongly he refused to second guess himself. He risk it to obey the Lord. Spiritually speaking, he's walking on the water again, but this time he refuses to take his eyes off Jesus. We all want to walk on water – do a little supernatural surfing – participate in God's miracles - but it always takes faith. We've got to be willing to muster courage, and set aside fear, and step out in faith when the Spirit nudges us.

So Peter grabs his hand, lifts him up, and “He, leaping up, stood and walked and entered the temple with them - walking, leaping, and praising God.” Notice the completeness of the miracle. Not only were the man's ankles dislocated, his leg muscles had atrophied from decades of immobilization. Normally, it would've taken weeks and lots of physical therapy for this man to regain his balance and the use of his legs. Yet, just seconds after this miracle takes place the man is running and leaping through the Temple. Jesus is not only a Great Physician - He's also quite a physical therapist.

“And all the people saw him walking and praising God. Then they knew that it was he who sat begging alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. Now as the lame man who was healed held on to Peter and John...” This fellow had been plagued by *lame legs*, but he wasn't a *lame brain*. Rather than run home to show off his new wheels, he held on to Peter and John. Obviously, there was more he could learn from these two men. It's important when God does a miracle in our lives we hold on to it for awhile. Often when God works, we revel in the results, without realizing that a lesson comes attached. This man's legs are healed, but his heart is open.

“Now as the lame man who was healed held on to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the porch which is called Solomon's, greatly amazed.” This was the covered colonnade just east of the Gate Beautiful. “So when Peter saw *it*, he responded to the people: “Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this?” Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?” How refreshing it is for Peter to so quickly disavow any personal responsibility for this miracle. Peter's failure in the garden humbled him. No lingering in the limelight. He and the lame man won't appear on Christian television. There won't be a photo in his monthly newsletter. He doesn't even start a healing ministry.

Instead he proclaims, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let *Him* go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses.” What an irony, the Jews “*killed the Prince of Life.*” But God raised Him up - and He's still knocking at your heart's door. Walter Wink once said, “*Killing Jesus was like trying to destroy a dandelion by blowing on its head.*” Jesus ascended to the Father – but has returned in the person of the Holy Spirit - no longer confined by human limitations. He reveals Himself in countless hearts and in ever corner of the planet. Peter is confronting the Jews. They can't duck Jesus. He won't go away. You can even kill Him, and He's not backing off. He's on you - *like white on rice*. His love keeps Him coming hoping you'll repent and let Him run your life.

Verse 16, “And His name, through faith in His name (the powerful name of Jesus), has made this man strong, whom you see and know. Yes, the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.” Peter doesn't even take credit for the faith he exercised. He says even *the faith* he exhibited came from Jesus. Peter's faith was apparently the special **gift of faith** spoken of 1Corinthians 12:9. Paul is listing various spiritual gifts when he writes, “and to another wonder-working faith.” When you need a miracle – don't just pray for the miracle – also pray for the faith to receive. There is such a thing as a supernatural gift of faith.

Jesus told us in Matthew 17:20, “If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘move from here to there,’ and it will move.” A mustard seed is first planted in the soil, then it takes root and sprouts. Likewise, the gift of faith is an planted faith. The Holy Spirit sows it in the soil of the heart, so that with *IT* we can move mountains. This is the faith that's “dead to doubts, dumb to discouragements, and blind to impossibilities.” To do great things for God we need to pray that He'll give us His faith!

“Yet now, brethren, I know that you did *it* in ignorance, as *did* also your rulers. But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...” Notice, this invitation doesn't include baptism. If baptism was essential for salvation it would've been mentioned. Peter's emphasis is “*repent.*” Repentance is more than remorse or regret. **It's the willingness to change.** Not the power to change – we lack the power - that's why we need Jesus – but the willingness to do whatever God asks.

And I love God's response to our repentance. It's threefold... He **converts**. He turns us around. Gives us new drives and desires. He **blots out**. The Holy Spirit is like bounty paper towels. He's the quicker picker upper. He's multiplied. He soaks out the deepest stains. And He sends **times of refreshing**. The Holy Spirit is like a warm day after a cold winter. You can open the windows and let in the fresh air. Everything seems rejuvenated. There's a smile back on your face. A bounce again to your step. New possibilities are in the air. This is the filling of the Spirit.

Verse 20, “and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.” When I give an invitation I track with Peter up to this point... Repent... You'll be converted, your sins blotted out, refreshment will come... But I'd never say, repent and Jesus will return and restore all that sin destroyed. Yet on this day that is exactly what Peter promises - the end times. The term “**times of refreshing**” was also an idiom for the Kingdom age - the time yet future - when Jesus will reign over the earth for 1000 years. *Peter says to Israel, get saved and all God's promises will be fulfilled.*

In the days of their exile in Babylon, God promised the Jews a New Covenant. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel promised Israel the three “Rs”... God would **return** the Jews to their homeland. He would **regenerate** their evil hearts. And He would **restore** to them the Kingdom.

At this point in history they were back in the land. Through the cross of Jesus, a changed heart was now possible. Apparently, if they'd repented and believed they could've had what

was next - *the return of Jesus, and the restoration of the Kingdom...* the end time scenarios would've been activated.

It's a provocative thought, if Israel had received the Gospel the church could've been raptured at the end of Acts 3, the world plunged into Great Tribulation, and according to Daniel, seven years later Jesus would've returned. Historians tell us that in the year 40 AD the Roman Emperor Gaius, or Caligula as he was known, dispatched a legion of soldiers to Palestine, along with a statue of his likeness. Orders were given to erect the statue in the Holy of Holies within the Temple and require the Jews to worship the emperor. A key event in Daniel's vision of the end times, is Antichrist's desecration of the Temple. He sets up his image and forces the world to worship him. It could've happened in 40 AD. If the Jews had accepted Peter's offer of salvation God was prepared to set in motion the end time prophecies.

As it turns out the Jewish leaders rejected the Gospel - Caligula was assassinated before his statue arrived in Caesarea, and the Roman soldiers were ordered back to Rome. When Israel rejected Peter's invitation God put the end time prophecies on pause, and reached out to the Gentiles. And that's where we've been on God's timetable ever since. This also explains Peter's quotation from Joel 2 on the Day of Pentecost. In his mind the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was companion of the final judgment. This is why he spoke of "*wonders in heaven... blood and fire and vapor of smoke... the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood.*" It all would've happened then if the Jewish nation had believed. For the moment God is reaching out to Gentiles, but one day the invitation of Peter will be repeated to the Jewish nation. This time they'll trust Jesus as their Messiah, all Israel will be saved... and God will release the pause...

Verse 22, "*For Moses truly said to the fathers, 'The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear in all things, whatever He says to you.'*" The prophet like Moses was Jesus! "*And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.*" He quotes from Deuteronomy 18.

"Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days. You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, '*And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*' In other words, all God's promises were targeted toward this generation. "*To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities.*" Jesus and the NT authors taught that the Gospel was to the Jew first and then to the Gentiles.

In chapter 4 we see the tragic response by the Jewish hierarchy. "*Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them (all the bigwigs), being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.*" Remember the Sadducees were the anti-supernaturalists. They rejected the notion of miracles or the afterlife. Thus, they opposed the resurrection. While Jesus was on earth His primary opposition came from the Pharisees. They didn't like His application of the Law and His disregard for tradition. But the Church's chief opposition will come from the Sadducees.

Verse 3 “And they laid hands on them, and put *them* in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.” Notice the rate of growth in the Early Church... and it was all conversion growth. Nobody was transferring from other churches since there were no other churches... In just a few days the church in Jerusalem went from 120 in the upper room - to 3000 on the Day of Pentecost – now to 5000 men, plus women and children.

“And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem.” This family of Annas was an extremely powerful Jewish family. After being arrested, Jesus appeared before both Annas and Caiaphas. Annas and his sons held the highest positions in Judaism. Five of his sons were High Priest at one time or another.

“And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, “By what power or by what name have you done this?” Deuteronomy 13 warns that a false prophet with demonic powers may come and work miracles to draw people away from Jehovah, the true God. Such a person was to be stoned to death. It was the Sanhedrin's duty to ask in who's name a miracle was performed.

“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit (Notice, it happens to him again!), said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: If we this day are judged for a good deed *done* to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole.” Wow what boldness. This is what the filling of the Spirit provides – fearless courage! Recall “*Christ*” means “Anointed One” or “Messiah.” Peter is saying you’re Messiah came – you crucified Him – but God raised Him from the dead.

“This is the ‘stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.’ Peter quotes a familiar Psalm, 118:22. The architects of Judaism reject Jesus, but He ends up the Church’s foundation stone. “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” *Exclusive?* Yes. *Ambiguous?* No. Without hesitation, without intimidation, Peter makes it crystal clear, without Jesus Christ a person is lost and damned forever.

“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled.” Annas’ family had been trained in the elite yeshivas. Whereas, the apostles were blue collar, Joe the Plumber types. Yet they spoke from Scripture with clarity and authority. At first the religious dignitaries were stunned. How can this possibly be? Then the answer... “And they realized that they had been with Jesus.” This is the key. *Fluency in Greek – mastering systematic theologies – education in comparative religions – stuff the seminary teaches...* may have some value, but none of it is ever a substitute for spending time with Jesus.

You’ve heard what the letters “PhD” stand for? “*Piled high and deep.*” And that's all a formal theological education is worth unless the person who gets it, has also been with Jesus. “*Spending time in the halls of higher learning is not nearly as important as spending time at the*

feet of Jesus.” What Peter and John possessed made what they lacked totally obsolete.

Verse 14, “And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, “What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them *is* evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny *it*. But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name.” The Jews thought the movement would die out if they killed its leader, but there’re new sprouts. Remember what Jesus said in John 12:24, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.” The harvest has begun, and the Jews realize they can’t stop it.

“So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.” They try to intimidate Peter and John into silence. “But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” Peter has no choice. He’s been commanded by God to add speech to his faith. He has to speak out! Let me ask you, what are the thoughts that cross your mind when someone tries to silence your witness? “*This could cost me my job.*” “*This will hurt my popularity.*” “*I better not push the issue.*” “*I should avoid the conflict.*” None of that matters. It’s not our choice any way. You and I, and all Christians are under divine mandate to speak what we know about Jesus.

“So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done. For the man was over forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.” He’d been lame for four decades. Albert Camus once said, “*What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear... in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could arise in the heart of the simplest man.*” That’s a perfect description of the witness of the early church.

Verse 23, “And being let go, they went to their own *companions* and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.” They probably returned to the upper room where the Holy Spirit had first been poured out. “So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said...” And notice what action they take once they’ve been threatened? They pray! They don’t protest, or boycott, or file a lawsuit... they pray! “*When your knees knock knell on them.*” And that’s what they did!

And here’s their prayer, “*Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them...*” Notice first, they get their eyes on God. Their starting point isn’t their fear, or their enemy – it’s their God. God made all things! God knows all things! God can do all things! This is my God! CS Lewis once said, “*The first prayer of all prayers is... may it be the real God to whom I pray, and may it be the real me who prays.*” They remind themselves God is sovereign, even over their situation.

Then they turn to His Word. “*Who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: (and they quote Psalm 2) ‘ Why did the nations rage, and the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the LORD and against His Christ.’ ”*

God foresaw how *the rulers* had ganged up on Jesus. He wasn't caught off guard. "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done." Herod and Pilate and the Priest thought they were in charge. In reality they were puppets on a string – fulfilling God's purposes. And nothing has changed in the last few months. God is still the boss!

So they pray, verse 29, "Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus." This is not how we usually pray... When we face persecution, we ask God to take it away. Not so here... Some of us would ask for wisdom that we could appease the authorities. "Lord show us a low-key approach." That's not how this church prays... Winston Churchill once said, "An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile hoping it will eat him last." Rather than appeasement, this church prayed for boldness and victory! "Look on their threats, but make us a greater threat!"

Rather than lay low, these men want to up the ante! Rather than pray for protection they pray for courage and a broader impact. Phillips Brooks once said, "Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks."

In verse 31 God sends His emphatic answer. "And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness." The foundation of the building shook. The walls wobbled. The floor did the wave. And the disciples caught another spiritual wave – once again they were filled with the Holy Spirit and the result was a renewed desire to speak boldly!

Remember, these are the same people who were filled with the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Now two chapters later they're being filled again. RA Torrey once wrote, "We need to be filled again and again with the Holy Spirit. I am sometimes asked, "Have you received the second blessing?" Yes, and the third, and the fourth, and the fifth, and hundreds beside, and I am looking for a new blessing today." The baptism with the Spirit is a point-in-time experience, but it's not a one-time experience. There are multiple fillings. This is why we need to continually seek the power of the Holy Spirit!