

March 28, 2021
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Acts
Community Baptist Church
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Greer, SC 29650
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A SHORT HISTORY OF GOD'S GRACE Acts 3:12-26

The Apostle John did not mince words when he laid down the difference between truth and error in respect to Jesus. In his first letter he wrote, *“Every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already”* (1 John 4:3). In his second letter John wrote, *“For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist”* (2 John 1:7). Those are pretty conclusive statements. Either you confess Jesus to be the Christ, God in the flesh, or you are His enemy.

But is it not true that nearly all religions in the world acknowledge Jesus? In light of the abundant historical evidence that testifies to Jesus, a person would have to be quite foolish to deny His existence. All the religions do not deny Jesus Christ's existence. They just deny that He was God the Son in the flesh. That is to deny the keystone, the central truth of God's work in human history.

In eternity, before God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit spoke the first atom into existence, they predetermined in counsel that God the Son would come to live on the earth, take on human flesh, live perfectly under God's yet-to-be-spoken law, and shed His blood as the price to pay for sin. The Trinity settled that decree before they ever created Adam whose sin generated the need for the Savior from sin.

We who are born again by grace through faith need to be reminded periodically that God's grace is not a response to an unexpected problem that developed in His world. The Trinity determined in eternity that God would pour out His grace on sinful,

rebellious, and very needy humans, through God the Son. We who have received that grace (and continue to receive it) should be very thankful that God responded to the wretchedness of our human condition with the amazing supply of divine grace.

Human Wretchedness (vv.12-15).

Luke recorded this amazing event in which God revealed His mighty power. Peter's main concern at the outset of this sermon was to affirm beyond any doubt that human power did not undo the effects of sin. *And when Peter saw it he addressed the people: “Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk?”* (v.12).

It is significant that Peter addressed the crowd as “men of Israel.” The preacher saw right away how much attention God attracted to His miracle of healing the lame man. The people were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him (v.10). In response, *all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's* (v.11). “All the people” would have been predominantly of Jewish descent.

As the people gathered, Peter asked them, “Why do you wonder?” That was a fitting question for people of Jewish descent. “Men of Israel” highlights their history and, at the same time, offers a bit of rebuke. Why were people whose heritage was rooted in God's work astounded by a “simple” miracle? The Scriptures they had learned all their lives are replete with examples of amazing miracles from the calling of Abraham, through Moses and the Exodus, to the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

More than that, Jesus Christ had ministered in their midst for three years doing precisely miracles like this over and over. Peter had just reminded them of this truth in his first sermon: *“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—”* (Acts 2:22). Yes, it is the nature and intent of miracles to attract attention. Peter bought up the opportunity to point out the people's failure to appreciate all the works Jesus Christ had done in their midst.

The power and works of Christ stand in vivid contrast to the works we do by our own power. That is why Peter asked, “*Why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk?*” (v.12a). It was a very important correction. The implication is that people were talking like Peter and John had done this mighty work in their own strength.

It is difficult to separate the human instrument from the divine work. Sadder still is when human instruments try to take credit for divine work. How many ministries today are built on mere human personalities? By the thirteenth century the visible church had become thoroughly corrupted by secularism and materialism. The story is told of Thomas Aquinas visiting Pope Innocent II and finding him counting out a large sum of money. “You see, Thomas,” said the Pope, “the church no longer has to say, ‘Silver and gold have we none.’” “That is true father,” replied Aquinas. “But neither can she say, ‘Rise up and walk.’”

Rather than to take credit for God’s work, Peter quickly asserted that it is the God of history who has power over sin. He preached, “*The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus*” (v.13a). It is impossible to miss Peter’s affirmation that the God who did the miracle is the God of the Jews. The preacher reminded the people of their unique relationship with the one true God. Which relationship was always at the forefront of their minds. The people generally did not need much reminder because they were so proud to be the ONLY people of the one true God.

And yet, while the people were reveling in their privilege of being God’s chosen people, they might have been shocked back to reality when Peter immediately put the focus on the Servant Jesus. Being Jews (and especially those who were devout), the people were very familiar with the writing of one of their favorite prophets, Isaiah. They would have known well the four “Servant Songs” of Isaiah: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12. In fact, the Jewish teachers often argued whether the Servant described in these songs was Isaiah or the nation of Israel. Scholars still argue about this in spite of the fact that Peter cleared up all doubts or questions. As Isaiah 53 clearly explains, the Servant of the Lord is Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah who suffered and died for the sins of His people. Did anyone in that crowd

NOT know that Jesus of Nazareth had just suffered, died, and rose again?

The eternal plan was for God to glorify the suffering Servant. The God of the Jewish people *glorified his servant Jesus* (v.13c). Later in the history of the Church Paul taught in detail how Jesus the Servant is eternally equal with the Father and Holy Spirit. He taught the Christians in Philippi that *Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men* (Philippians 2:5-7).

But, in the Trinity’s eternal plan, Jesus, God the Son, diminished His glory temporarily and became one of us on earth. *And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross* (Philippians 2:8).

God the Father exalted the Son by giving Him the name Jesus. Jesus is the same as the Old Testament Hebrew name Joshua. In both the Hebrew and Greek, it means savior, especially Savior from sin. That is why the angel told Joseph, “*You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21). That is also what Paul meant when he wrote, *Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth* (Philippians 2:9-10). This Jesus is the topic of Peter’s sermon.

Peter addressed the general tendency for sinful humans to reject God. The Jewish people illustrated well how we prefer fellow-sinners over the exalted Jesus. It was our sin also that delivered Jesus to Pilate. Speaking of Jesus, Peter accused, “*whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him*” (v.13b). The preacher made a rather pointed application by accusing the listeners of delivering the God-exalted Jesus to Governor Pilate. In spite of Pilate’s efforts to release Jesus because He was innocent, those people denied the reality of who Jesus was.

That is the same guilt every person who does not accept and embrace Jesus as Savior bears before God the eternal Judge. Our sin drives us to prefer sinners. We too would, and do, respond like the Jews who “*asked for a murderer to be granted to you*” (v.14b). What

a contrast! On one hand, you have Jesus of Nazareth, God in the flesh, Jesus the Savior exalted for eternity. On the other hand, you have a wicked, lying, deceiving murderer. And you choose the murderer over God to be released? No greater atrocity can be imagined. But that is what every unconfessed sinner does. Only, we generally choose OURSELVES over Jesus, thinking we know what is best for us. So unlike Jesus who prayed in the Garden, we pray, “MY will be done or else!”

As are result of our choice for self over Jesus, we too are guilty of killing God’s Righteous One. Like the ancient Jews, we deny the Holy and Righteous One. “*But you denied the Holy and Righteous One*” (v.14a). To deny is to disown, repudiate any relationship with. This is the sinner’s attitude toward the Holy and Righteous One. That action and attitude testifies unarguably to the denier’s own unrighteousness.

We kill the living Author of life. Again Peter accused, “*And you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead*” (v.15a). Jesus had clearly established that He is the Author of life. Jesus said to Martha, “*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live*” (John 11:25). Jesus said to Thomas, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). Jesus is the Author, Creator of all things. *For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering* (Hebrews 2:10). John assured us that apart from Jesus nothing would exist, including knowledge of truth. *In him was life, and the life was the light of men* (John 1:4).

That was an astonishing affirmation and accusation for Peter to make. Is it true? Absolutely. Peter reminded the people, “*To this we are witnesses*” (v.15b). The people who heard Peter were condemned by witnesses to these truths about Jesus of Nazareth. Likewise, our own consciences stand up and testify against us that we really do know that Jesus the Savior from sin is exalted above all even as our Creator. And we also know that our sin killed Him, preferring ourselves as rulers instead.

Divine Grace (vv.16-26).

What hope does the person have who has denied and rejected Jesus? Peter preached that faith in Jesus’s name restores. Faith changes circumstances for the sinner. Peter told the people that “*His name – by faith in His name – has made this man strong*” (v.16a). Because there is no mention of the beggar’s faith, we cannot conclude that the beggar trusted God to work through Jesus’s name. But Peter and John certainly trusted God to do this miracle to glorify and exalt Christ. Without faith in Christ, they would have been foolish to make the offer and give the command. God the Holy Spirit led them to make this offer of restored health to the needy man, and they responded by faith.

It is fitting for us to consider a warning at this point lest we try to apply the picture of Peter’s and John’s faith in behalf of the beggar to our circumstances. It is not accurate to make the comparison that your parents’ faith can bring you spiritual healing. Another person’s faith cannot substitute for your lack of trusting God. This was a unique demonstration of Christ’s healing power which the apostles believed Christ would do in behalf of a sinner. The sinner was an ignorant beneficiary of Christ’s grace—until he realized the benefit he received.

The healing was a miracle of God’s grace and the accompanying fruit of faith is obvious. Maybe Peter pointed to the healed man and said, “*Whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all*” (v.16b). Everyone was witness to the work of grace. Everyone knew this man had been the beggar at the temple for how many years? Everyone had to admit that they now saw him healed.

What they also needed to acknowledge is that it was faith in Jesus that gave the man perfect health. A fair comparison can be made regarding the grace of spiritual health. Admittedly, it is difficult to see a lot of difference when a young sinner (child), who is reared in a Christian home under good rules, receives the grace of God through Christ and is born again. However, when an older sinner, who has had years of opportunity to demonstrate resistance to Christ and rebellion against God, is overwhelmed by God’s grace and forgiven, the evidence is abundant. And still, even the child who was

saved in a Christian environment should, as an adult, be able to observe where and what he or she could have been apart from God's grace. In every case, the change from sinner to healed saint is by faith through Jesus. It is His gift.

Further in the sermon Peter addressed what is done and what must be done. On one hand, sinners are ignorant of God's sovereign control. That is the kindness Peter showed them. *"And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers" (v.17)*. Was it really ignorance? It is possible to do sin ignorantly. Nevertheless, it is still sin and you are still responsible.

For example, you are driving down the road at 45 mph when suddenly you see blue lights flashing in the rearview mirror. The arresting officer walks up to the car and says, "Are you aware that you were exceeding the speed limit by 10 mph?" You reply, "No sir. I just turned on to this street about ½ mile back and I haven't seen any speed limit signs." And he says, "Ignorance of the law is not an excuse. In this town the speed limit on all residential streets is 35 mph." Did you know the speed limit was 35? No. Did you exceed the speed limit? Yes. Are you guilty of breaking the law? Yes. Do you have to pay a fine? Probably, yes.

In the same way we ask, "Do people commit sin against God and assume because of ignorance that it is normal living?" Yes. Are they still guilty of sinning against God's righteous standard? Yes.

So in His eternal plan, God simply chose to use ignorant sinners to accomplish His eternal plan. Christ's suffering was predetermined. *"But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled" (v.18)*. God promised through Old Testament prophets that the promised Messiah/Christ would suffer. That is especially true in Isaiah. Even the prophet Simeon had warned Mary that her baby Jesus would suffer because He was the promised Christ (Luke 2:34).

Nevertheless, sinners are guilty and must turn. They must *"repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out" (v.19)*. The people in the crowd needed to change their mind about Jesus of Nazareth. Instead of denying Him, they needed to have faith in Him and embrace His sacrifice. The requirement remains the same: Sinners need to turn away from the ignorance and rebellion against

Jesus. That is the only way for our sins that stand between us and fellowship with our Creator to be wiped away.

To people who repent, God gives the promise of restoration. This promise might be addressed to the restoration of individual sinners or to a broader application. The promise is *"that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you" (v.20)*.

In a way, *times of refreshing* is certainly the condition of the Christian who is enjoying fellowship with his Lord and Savior. However, this is clearly a biblical term to describe the reign of Christ on earth (Ezekiel 34:26; 44:3; Joel 2:26). Salvation, receiving Jesus as Lord and Savior by faith, is critical so that we may live in His future kingdom. That time of refreshing will come from the presence of the Lord. It will be our pleasure when God the Father sends the Son to reign in the kingdom. That was an especially pertinent promise for Jews who longed for the restored kingdom.

Christ coming to rule in His kingdom will also signal the restoration of all things. *"Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things" (v.21a)*. In God's perfect plan, Jesus Christ the Savior is in heaven interceding for us. But also in God's perfect time, He will bring all His plans to culmination in and through Jesus. This is no secret matter. God has communicated His plan throughout history. These are the things *"about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago" (v.21b)*. God had consistently delivered these promises and plans to His people through the Old Testament prophets. God is still on track to complete everything He promised.

God is still on track because God's message is unchanging. The consistency of God's promise goes all the way back to the time when God promised the Prophet. He promised the Prophet who will be like Moses. Peter preached, *Moses said, "The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers" (v.22a)*. Peter also preached the right response to the Prophet. *"You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you" (v.22b)*. He challenged the people to respond unlike the people's response to Moses. Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, God warned through Moses that the people needed to listen to the Prophet who was yet to come.

When God kept His word and sent Prophet Jesus, the people didn't listen. People still don't listen. That is a bad situation because there is a horrible result of rejecting the Prophet. "*And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people*" (v.23). God illustrated the threat in the wilderness as a whole generation of people who would not listen to Moses died. The warning has eternal consequences. Our plea is for sinners to confess their sins, repent, and change their attitude about Jesus. To refuse to change will result in eternal destruction.

The promise is certain. "*And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days*" (v.24). Christ's eternal kingdom is coming. All the prophets from Samuel to Malachi preached this message. God will keep His promises. And one of those promises is the promised blessing. This blessing is especially pertinent to the sons of the prophets. When Peter reminded the listeners that "*You are the sons of the prophets*" (v.25a), he emphasized the relationship the people had to the prophets as Jews. Because they were of Jewish descent, surely the sons have heard the promise. The sons are privileged people. They are like second, third, fourth generation Christians.

But more than being privileged to have the promise, they are privileged to be sons of the covenant also. This is *the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, "And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed"* (v.25b). God is still keeping His promise in the covenant He made with Abraham. That covenant is affirmed most clearly in Jesus who is Abraham's offspring.

Because God is keeping His covenant, His promise, God sent His Servant to turn you around. It is true that God sent the risen Jesus to the Jews first. "*God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first*" (v.26a). The Jewish people are so privileged. Nevertheless they have consistently denied and rejected the Servant of the Lord. And much the same happens with so many offspring of Christians. To whom much is given, much shall be required. God's gracious blessing turns the sinner from wickedness. God sent His servant "*to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness*" (v.26b).

We too are so blessed. God still pursues sinners and offers them eternal life through faith in Christ alone. He is the centerpiece of

God's story. In Him we have eternal life and without Him we can know only eternal destruction.