

Menlo Church
950 Santa Cruz Avenue, Menlo Park, CA 94025 650-323-8600

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communications@menlo.church.

Series: First Things First
Acts 3:1-4:31

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“Healing the World”

Matt Stephan

The year 2020 is the year that just keeps giving, and one of the things that just keep giving is really great Internet posts like *this*. I giggled all week at that. I'm sure it has given you a lot, but 2020 has given our church a chance to go back to basics and return to first principles, so we're studying a bit of the Bible called the *Acts of the Apostles* which is about the very first church, and we've been observing this simple truth: prayer isn't the only thing they did, but it is the first thing they did. *First Things First*.

Another thing you can observe in the book of Acts is a certain pattern of circumstances. It goes like this. That very first church finds itself in a mess. God rescues them with a miracle and then deploys them on a mission. Mess, miracle, mission. That's the pattern in the book of Acts. Right in the heart of that pattern is prayer. It's not the only thing we do, but it has to be the first thing we do.

This is a talk about prayer and some of the common questions around prayer based in Acts, chapters 3 and 4, and I want to start with a confession. I've never liked the book of Acts. I find it scary and intimidating, and this week and next week we'll be dealing with some of the toughest bits of the book of Acts. Now, next week's passage is tough because it contains the fourth weirdest passage in all of the Bible.

By my own personal rankings, there are only three weirder passages in all the Bible than Acts, chapter 5. Now, this week's passage is tough not because it's strange but because it is so deeply challenging to us. A brief recap, and then let's jump in. In Acts, chapter 1, Jesus has been resurrected and ascends into heaven to rule at God's right hand. In chapter 2, the Holy Spirit descends from heaven to guide and empower the first church. Then, Acts, chapter 3.

"One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money.

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. Then Peter said, 'Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.' Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong.

He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized

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him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him."

Now, a couple of key words stand out here. It's important that this happens at the temple gate called *Beautiful*. There are lots of gates going into the temple, and this one was called *Beautiful*. That was the name of the gate. We'll talk about beauty in a little bit. Another key word is *temple*, and I want to talk for a little bit about what the Bible has to say about the temple.

It's hard to imagine for us today because we don't have anything like the temple, but the temple in the ancient world was a centerpiece of spirituality for the Israelites. It dominated their thinking and imagination. King David, who was the greatest king of the Israelites, once wrote a poem that contained this line: *"Better is one day in your temple courts than thousands elsewhere."*

In the ancient world, to the Israelites, the temple was thought to function in a very specific way. The temple was where God was guaranteed to be available for healing and restoration. That's why it was better to be there than anywhere else. The temple was where God was reliably present. Have you ever had that sense when you're praying it just doesn't feel like God is listening? Maybe it feels like you're not even listening to your own prayer.

That's what is so great about the temple. God had promised to be there. It was a venue where you could reliably experience God, so it is significant that when Jesus comes along and onto the scene he says he will destroy the temple. They testify against him in the trial against Jesus. "This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" This was something Jesus was evidently famous for saying, and the part about rebuilding it in three days was Jesus' way of saying he was now the place where God was guaranteed to be present. Jesus was now the place where you could experience God.

Then, what the Bible has to say about the temple gets really crazy. Later, the Bible tells us that you and I are temples. The apostle Paul wrote, "Do you not know that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit who is in you whom you have received from God?" There is this phrase that keeps repeating in the book of Acts: *filled with the Holy Spirit*.

Anyone who is a follower of Jesus in the book of Acts is filled with the Holy Spirit. This phrase is so common that scholars say the book of Acts of the Apostles should really be called the book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit working through the apostles. God's Spirit that was guaranteed to be in the temple took on flesh in Jesus Christ and has now come to rest upon anyone who is a follower of Jesus.

Because of Jesus, you and I are temples of God's Holy Spirit, and here is the scary and deeply challenging part. You and I are venues where people can experience God. A Christian should be a sort of guarantee to the world. You can experience God right here through me, and that's challenging indeed, but Peter and John are exactly that.

Now, there is a subtle insult here that this man, unable to walk since birth, has been sitting every day outside of the old ineffective temple and nothing happened, but when the true temple (the followers of Jesus carrying the Holy Spirit within them) arrive on the scene, this man is immediately healed. Now, let's talk a little bit about healing.

Certainly, we believe God heals. The plain message of passages like these is that God can and does heal people in miraculous ways. Of course, the God who created everything and sustains its existence has the

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power to heal human bodies. We can and we should pray for healing, but there are corollary truths that must also be named.

One of those is that God doesn't always answer our prayers the way we want him to. If he did, that would make him subordinate to us. He's generous and good, and he loves us, and he's powerful enough to answer all of these prayers, but he doesn't have to do what we ask. That would put us in charge. Another truth that must be named alongside the reality that God can and does heal is that there are other kinds of miracles besides physical healing.

Science can heal the human body, so maybe healing isn't even the most miraculous of miracles. Science is good, and I think God is thrilled at the scientific advances that help the earth to thrive. Science can heal a lot, but it can't make you forgive. Science can heal a lot, but it can't restore a marriage. Science can heal a lot, but it can't make you generous or humble. Sometimes, we pray a prayer and God answers it in an unexpected way to build forgiveness or restoration or humility into us, and God answering a prayer with a different kind of miracle is exactly what the apostle Paul was talking about when he wrote,

"Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

That sounds pretty miraculous to me. In fact, I got to witness a miracle like this once in my life. When I was in high school, there was a really wonderful person from my church, and she was something of a mentor to me. She was one of my friends' mom. She would help me with school. One time she made a costume for me for a thing I had to do for school. Most days after school I would go over to this friend's house, and her mom would talk with me about what it really meant to follow Jesus.

I would bring her questions about the Bible, or we'd share quotes from things we were reading. This family, and especially this mom, were so generous to me and just a really big part of my faith story. My little group of friends in high school who would go over to their house after school and everyone I knew from church were crushed when we learned she was diagnosed with stage IV cancer. Of course, we all prayed for her to be healed in long and intense prayer meetings, but God had a different plan.

One day in my junior year of high school I was talking with her and she said, "Of course, I would love it if God healed me. I love my family and my life, and I would love more time with them. Of course, I've asked God to heal me, but right now, though, God is really working in my heart." She said, "There are things about me that God is changing, and without the cancer, I would never let God work on that part of me. There are hurts in me that God is healing and without all of this I'd never let God have access to those parts of me."

I'll never forget this. She said, "He's changing me in ways I will be grateful for even if he doesn't heal my body." She was a place you were guaranteed to experience God, and God didn't heal her body, and eventually she passed away, but we all saw a miracle anyway. She was a temple. Now, other times the story turns out differently. Check this out.

[Video]

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Female: I had gone to my doctor for my annual exam, and when she did the breast exam, I will always remember she looked into my eyes and said, "I feel something. Do you feel something?" I knew from her reaction it wasn't good. I really thought I was going to have the experience of knowing what that fear and worry is like when you're waiting to get a diagnosis but then everything turns out all right, and you're fine, and you're good, and that was not the case.

I found out I had stage II breast cancer (ductal invasive carcinoma, to be specific). My initial thoughts were fear and worry and anxiety. I'm a mom of four kids. "What's going to happen to my kids? How are they going to handle going through this?" In that time, while I was waiting for the results from my biopsy, I happened to go to a spiritual retreat which, of course, was God's perfect timing that would happen right then.

I remember praying with a friend who was there, and as we prayed, I had this image of myself wrapped in a blanket of fear and anxiety and worry, and I had this picture of God pouring down his grace and his presence and his peace. Just pouring it down... This was the only access he had to me because I was wrapped in my own fears and worries and God came to me and was giving me his peace and presence and promising me that he would be faithful and that he would be with me.

I don't know that I've ever had an experience in my life where I've felt the presence of Jesus so deeply as I did during my year of cancer. When I was first diagnosed, somebody had sent me the prayer from Saint Patrick's Breastplate, which if there was ever a more appropriate prayer for a breast cancer patient, it's the prayer from Saint Patrick's Breastplate.

It has a lot of words to it, but the ones I would hold onto and remember anytime I went into an operating room or was laying on a table or getting a scan, I would say to myself, "Christ beside me. Christ beneath me. Christ before. Christ all around me." That kind of became my little mantra to remind me that I was not alone and that even though I have a wonderful family and community and friends who couldn't be there with me, Jesus was there with me.

It truly was the peace that passes understanding, because it didn't make sense logically what was going on in my life that I would feel at peace and that I would be okay with where I was, so truly that peace was allowing me to go through this with him. All we have is today, and God is with us. God reminded me that he is the God who gives peace and hope and that those things are not dependent on our circumstances and our current situation, but they are dependent on a good and strong and loving God who knows us and sees us.

[End of video]

Maybe you've had God answer prayer in a powerful way. This week you should talk with your Life Group about a time God answered your prayers maybe in a miraculous way or maybe in an unexpected way. Maybe it's through a Zoom call or a text message thread, but you should share those stories with your Life Group this week. Well, God answered Peter and John's prayer to heal this man, but the challenging passage doesn't end there. Let's return to our passage.

"While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished... When Peter saw this, he said to them: 'Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. [...] 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 completely healed him, as you can all see.' [...]"

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day.

But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand. The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. [...] They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: 'By what power or what name did you do this?'

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: 'Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone." Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.'

Famous and beautiful words from Peter, but there again is this repeated phrase: *filled with the Holy Spirit*. Peter speaks the truth because he is filled with the Holy Spirit, and that invites the question, "Who or what is this Holy Spirit?" Now, the first time we hear of the Holy Spirit in the Bible is the second overall verse in the whole Bible (Genesis, chapter 1, verse 2). *"Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."*

The Holy Spirit is present at creation, and over the next two chapters in the book of Genesis, the universe is created, and it culminates in the creation of humans who are placed in a perfect and thriving garden. Then, this verse: *"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."* Then, after six days of creating on that very first Sabbath, God rests, not out of fatigue but out of joyful celebration in creation's goodness. God saw that his creation was good, but what does it mean that creation was good?

Old Testament expert, Walter Brueggemann, comments, "The good here used for the creation narrative does not refer primarily to a moral quality but to an aesthetic quality. It might be better translated lovely or pleasing or beautiful. The shift from the sixth day to the seventh Sabbath day is then not just that time had run its course but that God knows satisfaction and delight in what he has wrought. He rests not because the week ends but because there is a satisfying finished quality to his creation."

Now, all of this tells us something important about the Holy Spirit (some important things that have implications for our passage). It tells us the work of the Holy Spirit is to bring God's beauty into the world. It tells us the purpose of the Holy Spirit is goodness. It tells us the Holy Spirit is world creating. It tells us the universe was created by this Holy Spirit. It is a cosmic power.

The purpose of the Holy Spirit is to make things good, and the power of this Holy Spirit is cosmic (it created the universe), and here we start to get a glimpse of the truly challenging stuff in the book of Acts. Followers of Jesus are filled with this same Holy Spirit. If you are a follower of Jesus, this cosmic power to bring goodness into the world in Jesus' name lives in you (ordinary, overwhelmed, anxious, exhausted little old you), and that is why prayer is the first thing we do. Prayer is how we tap into this cosmic power. The story goes on.

"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. [...] After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old."

Yes, that's what it says. Now, if you are around or above 40 years old and you're feeling insulted, then you have correctly understood this passage. In those days, the age of 40 was old, old, old, and if you had the power to heal someone, a wiser investment of that power would be to heal someone much younger with many years ahead of them rather than some ancient 40-year-old.

Now, the meaning of the text is supposed to be, "Look how generous and lacking in self-interest the disciples were helping someone who was too old to ever help them back. What great people!" That's true. We are to bring goodness into the world without a thought of how we might be repaid for that, but at 38 years old, I find this insulting.

"On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God." Prayer isn't the only thing we do, but it has to be the first thing we do. The early church finds itself in a mess, and what do they do? They pray.

A bit about prayer... We're in 90 days of prayer right now, and I have just found it so life-giving to lean into what God is doing at Menlo Church. I really think you should sign up. There are like 70 more days left, but sometimes it is easy during something like 90 days of prayer for prayer to become something of a chore.

Now, one thing that helps me when I'm stuck in prayer is to remember these same disciples (Peter and John) aren't very good at praying in the beginning. In Luke, chapter 11, when they first start hanging out with Jesus, they ask Jesus, "Lord, will you teach us to pray?" Maybe that's a great way for you to start your prayers each day. Ask Jesus to teach you to pray.

I've been asking Jesus to teach me to pray, and I've been asking Jesus to teach Menlo Church to pray, but I also think of other things where learning feels like a chore in such a way that we miss the grandeur of what we're really learning, like maybe riding a bike. At first, riding a bike is about when and how hard to brake and how to keep pedaling to keep your balance and to look both ways in the street, but in the end, it's really not about those things at all. It's about all of the places you can go on that bike.

We're teaching my daughter, Margo, during the asynchronous parts of online kindergarten. She's learning the alphabet and sight words and sounding things out. Every day, I want to tell her, "It is not about those things at all. It is about the awesome mind-expanding books you're going to get to read someday." Prayer is the same way.

Dallas Willard put it like this: "It would, of course, be a low-voltage spiritual life in which prayer was chiefly undertaken as a discipline rather than a way of co-laboring with God to accomplish good things and advance his kingdom purposes." Prayer is co-laboring. It is co-creating good things with God. Praying this way gets Peter and John into a mess with the local religious authorities, and the first thing this first church does in a mess is to pray, so they pray.

"Sovereign Lord,' they said, 'you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one."

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."

Now, I know here in the Silicon Valley there might be a stigma around being a Christian, and I also know the list of bad qualities associated with this stigma is really long, and that's why Acts is scary. You and I right here in the Silicon Valley with our jobs and reputations on the line are supposed to pray for boldness in letting people know that Jesus can create goodness in their lives again, that there really truly is good news, so here at the end, I want you to pray.

Maybe start by praying, "Jesus, teach me to pray." I want you to join in the 90 days of prayer and fasting. I want you to set aside time each day to talk with Jesus, and as you do, I want you to ask Jesus to fill you with his Holy Spirit. I want you to tap into that cosmic power to create goodness. If you are a follower of Jesus, there is a truth here that you cannot miss.

You are a temple aimed at goodness and beauty and filled with the power to do miraculous things. People should expect to experience God when they meet you. We must embrace the reality that we carry within us the power to make the world good again. Filled with the Holy Spirit, a follower of Jesus is a spiritual force to be reckoned with.

Yes, people plot against this Jesus, but they plot in vain. His plan to heal the world is underway. He will make the world good again. He will wipe away every tear. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humankind which we might be saved. That Jesus is on the march. He is on the move, and it is shocking.

It is challenging that part of his plan is to use ordinary people like you and me in messy situations like 2020, so we have to pray. It can't be the only thing we do, but it has to be the first thing we do: to unleash this Holy Spirit power of garden goodness into your world upon everything you touch and upon everyone you know, every school or office or Zoom meeting, every friendship, marriage, and family.

Pray boldly for goodness. Tell people that things can be fixed and healed and redeemed. They will be walking and jumping and praising God because they met you, a carrier of the power to make the world good again, a follower of Jesus filled with the Holy Spirit. Ninety days of prayer and fasting is the least we could do.

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Jesus, we give our lives to you. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, Lord. Teach Menlo Church to pray. Silver and gold have we not, but we give what we do have. Be made good in the name of Jesus. Holy Spirit, come upon us. Amen.