

THE EXPLOSIVE CHURCH

(2) The Forty-Year Leap.

Acts 3:1-10. The new Church had been born for sure, but that did not mean that all the practices of Judaism were forsaken. Here John and Peter followed the custom of going to the Temple to pray at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and it was from this point of tradition that they were enabled again to launch out into the depths of that vital new experience soon to become known as "the Way." The "new wine" of which Jesus spoke in **Matthew 9:17** was once more to burst out from the "old wineskins" and flow freely to all.

Notice that the crippled man was being carried to the Temple halfway through the afternoon: most of the day had gone and with it the opportunity to beg, just as, at about 40 years of age, most of his life had also gone. Can you imagine his state of despair? In his extremity he was bold in asking Peter and John for money: anyone pious enough to go to prayers would most likely be generous with his worldly goods as well!

But Peter had much more to give than money. Through the working of the Holy Spirit within him, he could reach out to the man at the point of his greatest need. We should remember that miracles were never performed by Jesus, or His apostles, simply to impress people: they were used instead to manifest the grace of God to needy men and women. And this grace was offered to the man in those memorable words of Peter – "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."

Why do people go to church? Are they conscious of some need they hope will be met? Can the church meet that need? What do we offer them? Can we still say "in the name of Jesus Christ ...WALK?"

In a compassionate gesture which surely boosted the cripple's faith, Peter reached out his hand and helped him to his feet. And look at **verse 7** – "instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong." In those days a man was getting to be old at 40, and this one had never walked in all his life – yet here we see an instant cure, without the need for restorative massage or physiotherapy! The empowering was complete! He stood, he walked, he leapt, and best of all, instead of racing off home to tell his family, he went into the Temple courts, praising God. **Isaiah 35:5,6** lists some signs of the Messianic age – "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy." The crowd around, recognizing the man, were filled with wonder and amazement. Were they even dimly aware that the Messianic age had begun?

How is Isaiah 35:5,6 fulfilled in our lives and our churches today?

Acts 3:11-16. Of course, everyone's eyes were on Peter and John, and Peter was quick to see the danger and to seize the opportunity to deflect the glory from himself to his Lord. Three years of training with the Master Teacher now bore fruit in that masterful sermon which began firmly in the Old Testament and finished up with a challenge to accept Christ as Lord. Like any pious Jew, Peter referred in **verse 13** to the God of the revered patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and in the next breath, affirmed that the same "God of our fathers" had glorified His servant Jesus. There was no soft-peddling, no shirking from the truth. Like a skilful surgeon Peter probed to uncover the sin in men's hearts, particularly in **verses 13-15**, with the thrust of "you handed him over," "you disowned him," "you killed him," and concluding with an uncompromising witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As evidence of this, Peter declared, it is by faith in this risen Christ that the cripple has been healed. Notice that Peter did not specify *whose* faith it was that had the effect: at what point did the faith of Peter and John transfer itself to the man? Compare the paralysed man let down through the roof right at the feet of Jesus. **Luke 5:20** says that "when Jesus saw *their* faith" He acted for the man's healing. How much faith do we exercise when we pray for our friends? It seems to be of vital importance!

Many people even today blame the Jews for crucifying Christ, as if to exonerate themselves. What evidence would you give them that we are all guilty, and that Christ died for the whole world?

However, in **verses 17-26**, we see that Peter is still talking from the point of view of Israel. He begins by allowing that they sinned in ignorance, and here is an oblique reference to **Numbers chapter 35**. For God, in His mercy, instructed the Israelites to mark out 6 cities of refuge to be spread throughout the land so that if someone had killed another quite accidentally, without any malicious intent, he might run to a city of refuge and stay there, safe from any avenger, until his case was tried by a court. To keep his immunity he must stay in the city until the death of the high priest, but once the high priest had died, he could return to his home under an amnesty for life. It is significant to consider that our High Priest has died and so we are freed from the punishment of our sins of ignorance through His death and resurrection!

We often wonder what will happen to those who have never heard of God or Jesus. The God of Israel showed mercy and compassion in appointing cities of refuge. Does God's nature ever change?

In the rest of the sermon Peter shows that Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies that God gave to Israel, and makes an oblique reference to **Isaiah 43:25** as one of them: "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more." He urges them to repent so that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" and so that Jesus may soon come back to earth to restore all things. The apostles expected Jesus to return soon and so they had a big incentive, a sense of urgency, that made them persuasive in their teaching. But at this time their vision was still influenced by their Jewishness: they reasoned that, if *Israel* would turn to the Lord, it would hasten the time when He would return and bring with Him refreshing for all the world. It is true that Israel's repentance will bring blessing to the whole world, but the programming belongs to God.

Do we really believe that Jesus could come back to earth soon? Do we witness with the sense of urgency that reaped such a harvest when the apostles spoke?

So we come to **chapter 4:1-4**. Peter and John suddenly faced opposition – and from the same people who had condemned Jesus to death. The captain of the Temple guard was customarily a member of one of the leading priestly families, and ranking next to the high priest. The Sadducees were a priestly sect who controlled the Temple, with the high priest, who presided over the Sanhedrin, being one of their number. They did not believe in the resurrection or a personal Messiah, yet ironically they held that the Messianic age was present then, and must be preserved at all costs! So they were "greatly disturbed" at this new threat to the old religious system, in spite of the fact that this system, though established by God, had been corrupted by human additions over the years so as to be almost unrecognizable. Back in **Matthew 15:9** Jesus had accused the religious leaders, "They worship Me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." It did not count for anything that a despairing man had been given new life: they were just blindly mad that the punchline of Peter's message was the resurrection of Jesus. It is significant that Simeon, when blessing the baby Jesus, had said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against." (**Luke 2:34**)

Note **verse 3**. The evening sacrifices ended about 4 o'clock, when the Temple gates were closed. Any judgements involving life and death must be begun and concluded in daylight hours. Ironical that they had not been so keen to abide by the law when they put Christ on trial at night! So Peter and John were confined to prison, but the Holy Spirit was not: **verse 4** tells us that the number of believers grew to about 5,000 men, let alone women and children!

There have been other great heroes who have died sacrificial deaths for mankind: what was the difference with Christ's death? What proof have we that He was indeed the Son of God?

Verses 5-12. Note the roll-up of accusers. What had Peter done, the last time he had been in danger from Caiaphas? We see in **verse 8** he was a very different Peter now: he was under the direction of the Holy Spirit! It is thrilling to read his uncompromising reply to his inquisitors in **verse 10** – "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."

One of the first results of the infilling of the Holy Spirit was a new revelation to the apostles of the Old Testament. This revelation had been veiled when Jesus was still with them and talked about His death and resurrection: they simply could not comprehend it. He Himself had told them in **John 14:26** that the Holy Spirit would teach them all things and remind them of everything He had said. Now Peter goes on to quote **Psalms 118:22**, which the Lord had applied to Himself in **Matthew 21:42** - "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes."

There were 2 stones of vital importance in Palestinian buildings, without which the whole structure could collapse. First, the cornerstone, set in place at the start of building, placed on a corner and setting the guideline for the walls; each stone in the wall had to be strictly in line with that cornerstone. Then there was the capstone, the "finishing touch" stone that was inserted into the peak of the archway at the completion of the building, to stabilise the stones around it and sometimes bearing some mark of identity of the owner. These 2 stones both speak to us of Christ. The prophet Zechariah in 10:4 foretells "From Judah will come the cornerstone" and Paul in Ephesians 2:20 echoes "Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone in whom the whole building is joined together." Then the writer of Hebrews sees both aspects of Jesus, in 12:2, "the author and perfecter of our faith", once rejected as irrelevant by men, but now signified by God to be the very core of our faith. And to cap it all, Jesus in Revelation 21:6 confirms, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End."

Verse 12 gives an indication, not yet fully realised by Peter even as he said it, that Christ's salvation is for all, Jew and Gentile. "Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is *no other name under heaven given to men* by which we must be saved."

Is Christ still the cornerstone and the capstone of the Church today? How much does the Church's effectiveness depend on the position Christ is given in its attitude and functioning? Look up Philippians 1:6 to see how this works out in our individual lives.

Verses 13-22. To say the council was taken aback is putting it mildly. Here were these ignorant fishermen with no particular social standing, who were expected to submit dutifully to whatever the religious rulers decreed, daring to defy their authority and actually accusing them to their face of some heinous act! We wonder if Caiaphas ever knew of Peter's denial of Christ? If so, he must have been quite astonished at his courage now! **Verse 13** has those lovely words, "they took note that these men had been with Jesus." What better recommendation could anyone desire?!!

It is great that in **verse 14** we see the healed cripple standing there with them. This was the next day: in the meantime he must have gone home and celebrated with his family and friends, and it would have been so easy for him not to worry about the fate of Peter and John. Yet here he was, knowing the hostility the religious leaders had expressed the previous day, taking his courage in both hands as he came to show his loyalty to his benefactors – and implicitly, his faith in Jesus Christ. His presence alone was enough to silence the objections of the council. By the way, it is interesting to note that it was *doctor* Luke who was convinced that the man's healing was a miracle!

There are 2 sides to the coin of witnessing for Christ – the spoken word and the unspoken evidence of a life transformed. Which is the more effective, and can we use one without the other?

But there is none so blind as he who does not want to see, and these religious rulers tried to exercise their authority by demanding that the apostles stop preaching in the name of Jesus – a demand that Christians have come up against all down the centuries and still face in many countries today. But in the face of the Spirit-filled Peter and John, their threats were impotent: what punishment could they administer which would not bring down the wrath of the "common" people? The reply from Peter and John has also rung down through the centuries – **verses 19,20** - as they issued the challenging question, who should they obey, the religious leaders, or God? "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard"

Can you think of other great saints in history who, at great risk to themselves and against strong objections from the authorities, fearlessly proclaimed the message of the risen Christ? How would you rate the influence they had on history?

Verses 23-31 see Peter and John going back to join the other believers. I wonder if they took the healed man with them? It is great to see the reaction of the little company – not a fearful prayer for escape from further danger, but a calm trust in the God Who rules over all, a realisation that more of the Old Testament was being fulfilled even in this opposition, and with it a prayer for boldness to continue the witness to Christ and His resurrection and for blessing on all who heard their message. It is no wonder then, that the place was shaken with a special visitation of the Holy Spirit, with the result that all of them were enabled to speak the Word of God boldly and opposition had no power to stop them proclaiming the gospel. It was a vivid demonstration that nothing, *nothing*, can thwart the plans of God!

Do we really believe that, or are we silent when difficulties or dangers arise? Peter and John could not help speaking about what they had seen and heard. Do we have the same compulsion?

In **verses 32-37** we see the outworking of the Holy Spirit in the daily lives of the believers, a vision which we can glimpse in our churches today and which is supremely precious. It is a fulfilment of the prayer of Jesus in **John 17 :11**, “that they may be one as we are one.” Here they were indeed one in heart and mind, no-one clinging to his own possessions, but sharing spontaneously with those in need. Power was there to proclaim the resurrection of the Lord, and grace was there for them all. What the believers could not know, of course, was that within less than 40 years Jerusalem would be destroyed and real estate would be worthless. It was good that the proceeds of sales could be used for something much more lasting than property!

Joseph the Levite is quoted as an example of this blessing given to others, a man with such a nature as to earn the nickname “Barnabas”, meaning “Son of Encouragement”. As a Levite he would be steeped in the religious life of Old Testament days, yet he was quick to accept the truth about Jesus the Messiah and to let his new faith influence his life. He would have given up a lot to follow Christ – a comfortable living, an estate, his prestige in society through his priestly office, and an undemanding life. Later we will see him supporting Paul on a dangerous and arduous journey to establish churches throughout Asia Minor.

The mutual help in that early church arose naturally from the believers’ oneness in Jesus. Filled with His love, that love spontaneously overflowed to others in His family. How much do we really care about helping others in need around us? We cannot do it just as a duty – the receiver will know at once. We cannot drum up true love for others out of sheer willpower because our love is tainted with love for ourselves. We can only love others as the love of Christ fills us and overflows naturally to them, as the power of His Holy Spirit fills our lives day by day.