

# HERSCHEL HOBBS

Commentary

UNVARNISHED TRUTH: LIFE'S GREATEST STORY

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UNSTOPPABLE GOSPEL

Fall 2016

# SESSION 7

## UNSTOPPABLE MISSION

### THE PASSAGE

Acts 1:4-8,12-14

### THE POINT

The Holy Spirit empowers us to spread the gospel.

### THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

It seems that many Christians no longer have the passion of the early believers to take on the mission Christ gave to the church. Fear of offending and being rejected has become more important than love of God and our neighbor, so we have chosen to leave to others the mission of spreading the gospel and making disciples. We need to turn from our own priorities and return to the mission Jesus gave to His followers in Acts 1.

### THE SETTING

The Book of Acts is the second of two volumes Luke contributed to the New Testament. His Gospel narrative focused on the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, concluding with Jesus' commission of His disciples and His ascension to heaven. Luke wove his two narratives together at the point of the commission and the promise of the Holy Spirit (see Luke 24:49-53; Acts 1:1-2:13). Thus, the Book of Acts begins where the Gospel narrative ended and focuses on the response of the disciples to Jesus' commission to spread the gospel, the good news.

## GET INTO THE STUDY

Jewish officials did their best to control and shape the message about the empty tomb and to explain away the possibility of a resurrection. Even though they tried to put a spin on the message, they had no control over the resurrected Jesus Himself. Over a 40-day period, Jesus appeared numerous times to various individuals and groups, presumably to encourage them and to teach them those things they had not been ready to learn before His crucifixion. At the end of 40 days, Jesus made one final appearance and delivered a major mandate to His disciples before ascending to the Father in heaven. Along with the mandate was the promise of the Holy Spirit who would empower them for the work and bind them together as a people of God.

## STUDY THE BIBLE

### *Acts 1:4-5*

<sup>4</sup> **And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me.**  
<sup>5</sup> **For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost [Spirit] not many days hence.**

**Promise.** That the “apostles” (v. 2) were **assembled together** probably was not unusual. They likely spent a lot of time together after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection; perhaps because they found safety in numbers. This assembling or “gathering” (NASB) together took on special significance because Jesus was **with them**. So it still should. The Greek words translated **being assembled together** could have a different rendering and thus a different meaning. For example, the New International Version rendering is “On one occasion, while he was eating with them.” The Holman Christian Standard Bible includes a note with alternative readings: “He was eating” or “He was lodging” with them.

We may wonder if **they** and **them** refers to “apostles” in the exclusive sense of “the eleven” (2:14) of the original Twelve or if the term may be understood more broadly. *Apostles* comes from a word that means “sent out.” Thus, they were “sent-out ones.” The term is

specifically applied to the Twelve, but in a broader sense would later be applied to other renowned Christian leaders, such as Barnabas (Acts 14:14) and Andronicus and Junias (Rom. 16:7). While portions of Luke's narrative seem to focus specifically on the eleven (1:26; 2:14), the plural pronouns may also be inclusive of the larger group of disciples defined in verse 14. Certainly, the commission of verse 8, if it is to be accomplished, cannot be regarded as the responsibility of an elite few but as a charge to the church as the fellowship of all believers.

Jesus **commanded them**, or “ordered them” (ESV), to **not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father**. “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised” (NIV). The word **command** makes it clear that Jesus' instructions were not options, suggestions, or possibilities. Sometimes the instructions of the Lord are specific; sometimes they are not. In either case, they call for a response of faith.

The order to **wait** implies something else was about to happen that they would run the risk of missing. Jesus did not say exactly how long that they would have to wait, but He did specify that the coming event would occur **not many days hence** and He did specify where it would take place—**Jerusalem**. Perhaps, they needed to be urged to stay in Jerusalem because the city was not a popular or safe place for followers of Jesus to reside at this point. Their natural inclination might have been to return to Galilee. Or perhaps it was where a few days earlier the greatest act of redemption had taken place. Perhaps it was because the greatest number of people resided there who would be receptive to the message they would declare.

Moreover, Jesus said, what was about to unfold would be the fulfillment of something **ye have heard of me**; something He had communicated to them previously—perhaps more than once. For example, on the night of His arrest, Jesus had spoken extensively to them about the coming of the Spirit to comfort, encourage, instruct, and empower them (John 16:7-15).

In an example of the overlap that exists between Luke and Acts, Luke 24:49 records similar instructions: “I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power on high.” **The promise** of which Jesus spoke was the promise of power, not personal power, but the power of God in the person of the Holy Spirit. The power of God would come upon them

when they were **baptized with the Holy Ghost** [Spirit] **not many days hence**. The word **baptized** means “complete submersion.” **Not many days hence** means “not many days from now” (NASB, HCSB), or “in a few days” (NIV). In fact, the pouring out of the Spirit would occur in 10 days—hence, on Pentecost.

In contrast to John’s baptism **with water**, which was a sign of repentance and purification, the baptism of which Jesus spoke was their being completely immersed by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. In that baptism, they would be empowered and equipped for the global mission they were to be assigned. The implication is that the administrator of the baptism with the Spirit would be God the Father.

What are some lasting truths from Acts 1:4-5?

1. When the people of God gather in the Lord’s presence, they are prepared to hear a word from Him.
2. The mandates of the Lord are to be obeyed, even if at some points the details are not fully revealed.
3. The promises of the Lord are sure.
4. God promised to pour out His Holy Spirit on His people—and He did.

### **Acts 1:6-8**

**<sup>6</sup> When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? <sup>7</sup> And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. <sup>8</sup> But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost [Spirit] is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.**

**Power.** Again, as in verse 4, we are reminded **they ... were come together**. They heard what Jesus had to say, but they still had questions. That His disciples **asked** their questions **of him** speaks to the open, honest relationship they had with Jesus. In fact, the construction of the verb allows for repetition; thus, they asked the question more than once, perhaps with a different disciple asking at different times over the 40-day period.

Even though they had seen and heard so much during their time with Jesus, the disciples still had some misunderstanding about Jesus as the Messiah, the nature of His kingdom, and their role as heralds of the King and the kingdom. That is evident by the question they raised in verse 6: **Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?** We tend to read **wilt thou** as a future tense when it is actually a present tense verb. The question then may be read with a sense of anticipation as in “are you” instead of “will you.” “Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?” (NLT).

For the most part, the Jews understood the promise of the outpouring of God’s Spirit in eschatological (that is, end-times) terms. Unfortunately, their eschatology was flawed. The question likely reflects the popular perception that the Messiah and His messianic kingdom would be a political kingdom under the rule of a son of David who would free Israel from Roman domination and restore Israel to its former state of glory.

Even if those who assembled with Jesus had moved beyond equating God’s kingdom with a political kingdom, their question still had a nationalistic implication. They still saw God’s **kingdom**, or God’s sovereign rule, as being realized in **Israel**—a limited view—not a spiritual kingdom that would extend to all peoples of the world. Their question also suggests that they feared Jesus was about to leave without their expectations being met, a feeling they already had faced at His death (Luke 24:21). As often happens to us, their preconceptions blinded them to the truth of what God was about to do or wanted to do in their midst.

Furthermore, the question provides evidence why Jesus wanted them to wait in Jerusalem for the outpouring of the Spirit before they launched out on mission. Only as they were immersed in the power, wisdom, and insight of the Holy Spirit could they come to a full comprehension of Jesus and His kingdom, a spiritual kingdom in which God is sovereign; a kingdom founded on faith in Him; a kingdom filled with the hope of eternal, God-like life beyond anything they had ever known.

Jesus did not answer the question directly. Rather, He redirected their thinking to consider who He was as the Christ, the mission for which He had come, and the commission He was about to give them. Many Christians continue to be more interested in predictions about the future than in the proclamation of the gospel.

Jesus told them, **it is not for you to know**. Obviously, we don't know some things. Some things we can't know; they are beyond our understanding—at least in this life. Some things we don't need to know because they are beyond our control and would only trouble us. The disciples desire **to know the times or the seasons, which the Father has put in his own power** fell into these categories. **Times** refers to chronological time, a schedule as it were. **Seasons** refers to events that occur in time or to “epochs” (NASB) or “periods” (HCSB) of time. Our knowing God's timing for accomplishing His purpose and the events of human history that He employs are not what is important. Those are things under **his own power**. This word translated **power** (*exousia*) refers to the “power of authority, having the right to choose, having the right to rule.” The Holman Christian Standard Bible translation is “by His own authority.”

On the other hand, some things we need to know and we can know. These are the things the Lord reveals to us; the things that ought to concern us. It is as if Jesus said to them, “Rather than talk about what you don't need to know and can't know because it is not your business, let's talk about what you need to know and can know because it is the business you are to be about.”

First, **ye shall receive power, after the Holy Ghost [Spirit] is come upon you**. The promise would be fulfilled. The Spirit would come, and it would come with power, to empower. The Greek word for **power** in this case (*dynamis*, from which we get our words *dynamite* and *dynamic*) is a word that also can mean “strength, ability.” The commission given to them was one that would require a power, strength, and ability beyond what they had within themselves individually or collectively. They would need a power that came from without, a power that overwhelmed them and came to reside within them. This would be God's wonder-working power that would bring glory to the name of the Lord.

**Ye shall be witnesses unto me** represents the Lord's expectations for them. **Witnesses** tell the truth about what they know about an occurrence. The truth they declare is based on experience, firsthand knowledge, what they saw and heard themselves. Witnesses tell the truth no matter the cost, again because that is what is expected of them. This commitment to the truth at any cost is further seen in that the word translated **witnesses** later came to refer to “martyrs” (its literal transliteration).

The universal scope of their witness was to begin locally but would know no bounds. They were to begin **in Jerusalem**, where they were; move outward to **all Judaea**—other people like them; on to **Samaria**—people not like them; and to **the uttermost part of the earth**. Sometimes we understand this visually as concentric circles, starting and moving outward. Perhaps practically that is what we must do, but not in the sense that we must accomplish one before we move on to the other. While the word for **uttermost part** is used here in the geographic sense meaning the “remotest part of the earth” (NASB) or “the ends of the earth” (NIV), the word *eschatos* is also used to talk about “last times.” Disciples of Jesus are to be His witnesses to the ends of the world to the end of time.

What are some lasting truths from Acts 1:6-8?

1. The power for effective witness comes from the promised, abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.
2. Our preconceptions can prevent us from seeing the larger things God is doing in this world and limit our view of the vastness of His kingdom.
3. Our faithfulness in fulfilling the commission is not dependent on how much we know but on how much we trust and obey.
4. Discipleship includes being a witness to the gospel wherever we are and wherever the Lord leads us.

### **Acts 1:12-14**

<sup>12</sup> Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a sabbath day’s journey. <sup>13</sup> And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas the brother of James. <sup>14</sup> These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.

**Prayer.** The 40 days of instruction having been completed and the commissioning of His disciples having taken place, Jesus ascended into heaven. The place of departure was the **mount called Olivet** or “the Mount of Olives” (HCSB), a two-mile ridge heavily covered with



olive trees located to the east of Jerusalem. This area, including the village of Bethany situated at its base, was the location for many critical events in Jesus' life. A beautiful panoramic view of the city of Jerusalem was and is possible from the top of the ridge.

Just as they had been instructed, **they returned to Jerusalem.** Luke noted that the distance from the place of the ascension on the Mount of Olives back to Jerusalem was **a sabbath day's journey.** (However, this does not mean the ascension occurred on the Sabbath, for 40 days after the resurrection would have been a Thursday.) The Mishnah, a rabbinical document containing interpretations of the law, limited travel on the Sabbath day to a little more than a half of a mile. Thus, the phrase became a way of specifying a certain distance, as in "a Sabbath day's walk from the city" (NIV). (For further background, see the article "Sabbath-Day Restrictions," in the current Fall 2016 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*.) We can only imagine what they talked about as they walked along. Or, did they walk along in silence, mentally processing what they had just witnessed?

When **they were come** into the city, **they retreated to an upper room, where they abode** or "were staying" (NIV, HCSB, ESV). "They went to the upstairs room of the house where they were staying" (NLT). Actually, the definite article *the* is present in Greek rather than the indefinite article *an*; thus "the upper room" (NASB, ESV), "the room upstairs" (HCSB), or "the upstairs room" (NLT), which suggests a specific place, perhaps the room where Jesus had met with His disciples for the Passover (Luke 22:12) or the room where He had appeared to His disciples the evening of His resurrection (John 20:19,26). Obviously, an upstairs room provided a level of privacy that a ground-level room would not.

The Synoptic Gospels, including Luke, provide a list of the names of the apostles. Luke provided a list in Acts probably to highlight that no longer were there 12 but 11. This set the stage for the group to select a person to replace Judas Iscariot and for Luke to give his account of what happened to Judas after his treacherous act of betrayal.

Their gathering to wait in this upper room was more than just hiding out or even passing the time, for **these all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication.** "They all joined together constantly in prayer" (NIV). In essence, they met to prepare themselves to receive the promise that in turn would prepare them for the

mission they had been assigned. Their preparation included ongoing communion with the Lord through prayer. “In an activist age one might expect the disciples to undertake some more ‘useful’ activity. They are told to be witnesses ‘to the end of the earth’ (1:8), and their first response is prayer.”<sup>1</sup> Such is a major lesson for the contemporary church who would take seriously the mission mandate of the Lord!

Note three important truths that come from this statement. First, the practice of prayer was an integral part of their gathering, not just for a few of the participants but **all** of them. In his Gospel, Luke highlighted the importance of prayer to Jesus. That was obvious to the disciples and led to their asking Him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1). **Supplication** is a specific element of prayer that includes entreaty or making a specific request to God. Another translation would be “petition.” We are not told what they prayed for, but perhaps it was for the promise of God to be fulfilled. Most contemporary English translations, relying on different manuscripts for translation, do not include the word supplication.

Second, prayer was not a one-time or even occasional occurrence but something they **continued** (2:42; 3:1). The word means “to be devoted to” or “to be steadfastly attentive to.” The verb tense suggests a repeated action, as in a habit. They “were continually devoting themselves to prayer” (NASB). Prayer was a part of their lives as individuals and as an ongoing practice in their gatherings.

Finally, they prayed **with one accord**. They prayed with “one mind” (NASB), one passion, and in complete harmony. “All these were continually united in prayer” (HCSB). Praying together was an expression of their unity, on the one hand, and as an important part of maintaining that unity on the other.

We also learn that the group increased in size (see v. 15) with the addition of **the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren. Women** had been an important part of Jesus ministry during His sojourn on earth. Therefore, we might expect they would have a critical part in the apostolic mission to spread the gospel. Some ancient texts read “wives and children,” presumably of the apostles, if those tests are accurate (compare 21:5). Nevertheless, it is true that the Greek word rendered **women** also can be rendered “wives,” and thus perhaps be a reference to the wives of the apostles. The reference to **Mary the mother of Jesus** is the last record of her involvement

in the history of the early church. That **his brethren**, meaning Jesus' brothers, were present is interesting because at one point in Jesus' earthly ministry they thought He was out of His mind (Mark 3:31-35).

Verse 14 is a telling verse in describing the early church: diverse in makeup, yet unified, and devoted to prayer. "The primary characteristic that marked their life together in this period was prayer, as they anticipated together the promised gift of the Spirit. ... The time before Pentecost was a time for waiting, a time spent in prayer undoubtedly for the promised Spirit and for the power to witness. There is no effective witness without the Spirit, and the way to spiritual empowerment is to wait in prayer."<sup>2</sup>

What are a couple of lasting truths from Acts 1:12-14?

1. The church of Jesus Christ is marked by a commitment to prayer.
2. Prayer is both an expression of unity and a factor in maintaining unity.

## LIVE IT OUT

Acts is a book of the history of the early church. We generally think of history only as a record of the past. Yet, in truth, we are not separated from our history; we are a continuation of it. Thus, we are to learn from it. Therefore, what we read in Acts is not what the church was; it is instructive to what the church is and what we are to be presently. We are on a mission that cannot be stopped!

*What is the mission mandate given to the church?* \_\_\_\_\_

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*What is the power source for carrying out the mission and how do we access it?* \_\_\_\_\_

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*What is key to preparing to be on mission?* \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>1</sup>William H. Willimon, *Acts*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988], 21.

<sup>2</sup>John B. Polhill, "Acts," in *The New American Commentary*, vol. 26 [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992], 90.

# SESSION 8

## UNSTOPPABLE MESSAGE

### THE PASSAGE

Acts 2:22-24,32-33,36-38

### THE POINT

Jesus died for our sins, rose again, and reigns as Lord.

### THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Many good groups and organizations exist in our communities that seek to benefit society in some way. The church, however, is unique. Many organizations are short-lived or diminish as the need they seek to meet is realized. Or, they change when leadership changes. The church is different. Christ gave His church one unchanging message to proclaim—the message of salvation in Christ.

### THE SETTING

The events in Acts 1 prepare for the miracle of chapter 2 when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the believers on the day of Pentecost. Endowed by the Spirit, the apostles boldly proclaimed Jesus as the Savior. Peter stepped forth to provide the Jews assembled in Jerusalem—both those who had returned from the Diaspora to reside there and others who may have been there for the great wheat harvest festival—the primary explanation of what had happened. First, he connected the immediate events with the promise of Scripture, especially as declared by the prophet Joel. Then, drawing on portions of Psalm 16 and 110, he lifted up Jesus as the Christ, raised from the dead and exalted with the Father. He concluded with a call for repentance.

## GET INTO THE STUDY

The verses selected for study in this session are from the last two points of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. Peter lifted up Jesus as the living Savior and Lord Christ. He is not to be ignored, but is to be received by repentance and faith. Those who receive Him are given the forgiveness of sins and the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit, so they too can share the message. This is the story of a message that cannot—and must not—be stopped.

## STUDY THE BIBLE

### *Acts 2:22-24*

**<sup>22</sup> Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: <sup>23</sup> Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: <sup>24</sup> Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.**

**Jesus Died and Rose Again to Bring Salvation.** The message of the church on mission is about Jesus. Apart from Him, the church has little to say that hasn't been said or couldn't be said by someone else or some other entity.

Peter began the proclamation portion of His message by identifying those to whom he spoke: **men of Israel**. Such an address may sound nationalistic on the one hand and chauvinistic on the other. Neither is true. Actually, it is an inclusive form of address. The word translated **men**, when used in reference to gender, does mean male, but when used generically of a group it can include both men and women. Other versions offer "Fellow Israelites" (NIV, *The Message*) and "People of Israel" (NLT). **Israel** refers to a people beginning with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with whom God entered into a covenant relationship whereby He would be their God and they would be His people. Thus,

with this address, Peter put his message in the context of covenant history. Given the makeup of his audience—“Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven” (2:5, HCSB)—they should have been able to understand what he was about to declare.

Peter called for their attention: **hear these words**. **Hear** means “to perceive by the ear.” It includes hearing in the physical sense accompanied by understanding in the intellectual sense. “Listen to these words” (HCSB).

The subject of Peter’s message was **Jesus of Nazareth**. The people knew Him by this name. **Nazareth** identified His place of residence; thus, differentiating Him from others who may have had the same name. Some translations render it as “Jesus the Nazarene” (HCSB, NLT). *Nazarene* is still a place designation, just as a person from Texas may be called a Texan. The term is not to be confused with the Nazarene sect (24:5) or the Nazarite (“Nazirite,” HCSB) vows of the Old Testament (Num. 6). By linking the word to the Hebrew word for branch (*nazer*), some Bible interpreters have suggested Nazarene was a messianic title, but that seems unlikely to most.

During Jesus’ earthly ministry, some opponents suggested His works were of the devil (Mark 3:22), others accused Him of blasphemy, and at His trial those who sought His death accused Him of being an insurrectionist. In stark contrast, Peter declared Him to be **a man approved of God among you**. Peter’s use of **man** called attention to Jesus’ personhood. **Approved** means “to prove what kind of person anyone is,” “to accredit.” Jesus was “attested to you” (NASB, ESV), “accredited by” (NIV, *The Message*), or “pointed out to you” (HCSB).

**God** was the one giving His approval. The means by which His approval was given was through things that only God could do: **miracles and wonders and signs**. These were things **God did by him in the midst of you**; things “God performed through Him in your midst” (NASB). **Miracles** were acts of superior power and unusual ability. **Wonders and signs**, two words that appear in tandem in the Book of Acts, refers to wondrous acts or miraculous occurrences that signify or point to something greater than the acts themselves. “Through him God did *miracles*, the power of God at work; *wonders*, astonishing, significant portents that point to God’s presence; and *signs*, miraculous embodiments of spiritual truth.”<sup>1</sup>

Certainly Jesus' miracles had not gone unnoticed. They were a matter of public record—**as ye yourselves also know**. Peter wasn't telling them something they didn't already know. Even those who did not see the miracles heard about them. The stories of healing the blind, mute, deaf, and the lame, and even of raising the dead, circulated widely and were at least one reason Jesus was so popular with some who were drawn to Him and resented by others who felt threatened by Him.

Peter's description of Jesus moved forward quickly to what was at the heart of his message. The miracles were undeniable, but God had a greater purpose for sending Jesus than as a conduit through which God did wondrous things. Jesus was **crucified and slain**—“put ... to death by nailing him to the cross” (NIV)—having been **delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God**. **Delivered** refers to giving one over to his enemies or to the power and will of another. **Determinate** means “to define by marking out the boundaries or limits of a place, thing, or action.” **Counsel** can mean “will,” “plan”, or “purpose.” **Foreknowledge** means “with forethought” or “by pre-arrangement.” No one took Jesus by force; no one took His life. God never lost control; neither did He react to something that caught Him by surprise. Jesus was “handed over ... by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge” (NIV); something God had in mind in eternity past, before the creation of the earth (Eph. 1:4).

However, while God was in control, Peter would not excuse those who were humanly responsible for bringing about Jesus' death. Yes, God **delivered**, but **ye have taken**. **Ye** is a personal plural pronoun referring to Peter's Jewish audience. **Taken** means “laid hold of” or “seized.” The Jewish perpetrators collaborated with others to carry out the dastardly deed of death. **Wicked** means “lawless.” **Hands** means “by the help or agency of any one.” Therefore, **wicked hands** is a way of speaking of the Romans (lawless Gentiles as far as the Jews were concerned) who had the official authority to carry out the execution. “You nailed [Him] to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (NASB); “With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to a cross and killed him” (NLT).

Still, God did not relinquish control, for Jesus' death was not the final act: **God hath raised [Him] up**. Jesus' resurrection was as much

a part of God’s **determinate counsel and foreknowledge** as was Jesus’ death. By the resurrection, God **loosed the pains of death**. **Loosed** means “to free what was tied or fastened,” “to break,” or “to destroy.” Metaphorically, “to loosen” was “to overthrow or do away with something or someone.” **Pains** denotes “intolerable anguish” or “sorrow.” Because the word is used to speak of the pain of childbirth, some see in this verse an image of Jesus having been “birthed out of death” into life. “In a remarkable mixed metaphor, death’s agony became its birth pangs: death was in labor and unable to hold back the ‘delivery’ of Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

God conquered death, freed Jesus from its bonds, and destroyed the agony that accompanied it. Peter offered the reason why this occurred: **because it was not possible that he should be holden of it**. “It was not possible for Him to be held by it” (HCSB, ESV). Plain and simple, death had no power over Him.

Peter dealt with two issues often found in tension in Scripture: divine sovereignty and human responsibility. “In the mystery of the divine will, God was working in these events of willful human rebellion to bring about His eternal purposes, bringing out of the tragedy of the cross the triumph of the resurrection. ... Peter carefully balanced all the participants in the drama of Jesus’ death—the guilt of Jew and Gentile alike, the triumphal sovereignty of God.”<sup>3</sup>

What are some lasting truths from Acts 2:22-24?

1. The focus of the Christian message is Jesus.
2. God gave His approval to Jesus and proved Him to be more than a mere man.
3. The atoning death of Jesus on the cross was not incidental but according to God’s plan.
4. God conquered death by raising Jesus from the dead.
5. God’s power is greater than death.

**Acts 2:32-33,36**

<sup>32</sup> **This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.**

<sup>33</sup> **Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost [Spirit], he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear.**

.....



<sup>36</sup> **Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.**

**Jesus Is Exalted as Lord.** The resurrection was beyond question as far as Peter was concerned: **This Jesus hath God raised up.** “God has resurrected this Jesus” (HCSB). **This Jesus** was Peter’s way of keeping the focus on Jesus of Nazareth as opposed to some other. For Peter, to believe in God is to believe in the resurrection. Since God was the cause behind it, there was no reason to doubt it. It was a testimony of His power. Furthermore, it was God’s ultimate affirmation of who Jesus is, leading to His exaltation as **Lord and Christ.**

To any who might have doubts about the reality of the resurrection, Peter offered one more proof to support his message: **We all are witnesses.** **Witnesses** is used in the historical sense meaning “those who are spectators or observers of something.” Peter and the other disciples had seen the risen Christ for themselves—and that more than once (1:2-3).

To this point, Peter’s message had called attention to the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Next, Peter focused on His ascension and exaltation. **Being by the right hand of God** is an allusion to Jesus’ ascension into heaven—another event Peter could have claimed to have witnessed.

**The right hand** was the hand of strength. To be positioned “to” (NASB, NIV), “at” (ESV, NLT), or **by someone’s right hand** was to be placed or assigned a position of honor and privilege; thus, to be **exalted.** **Exalted** means “to raise up; to elevate.” Metaphorically, it is “to raise up to the very summit of dignity, honor, and prominence.” Such was the case with Jesus in that He was raised up from the grave to be raised up to the place of the highest honor; that being at the strong, **right hand of God** the Father.

In that **exalted** state He **received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost** [Spirit]. Looking back, the Father had promised the Holy Spirit would come to empower the people for witness (1:4-8). Jesus, the resurrected Christ, received authority from the Father to send the Holy Spirit. That is just what He did. **He hath shed forth this**—“He has poured out this” (ESV)—**this** being the Holy Spirit. Peter explained to his Jewish audience that the pouring out of the

Holy Spirit on God's people was what **ye now see and hear**, referring to the phenomenal things that had just occurred (2:1-12). The people may not have witnessed the resurrection of Jesus as the apostles had, but they had just witnessed a result of the resurrection in the powerful manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Notice that in verses 32-33 Peter alluded to God in three persons: God the Father; Jesus as God Incarnate; and the Holy Spirit.

Verse 36 begins the climax of Peter's message. **Therefore** points back to all that he had said about Jesus from the beginning of his sermon and to the Father's affirmation about who He is. **Let all the house of Israel know assuredly** indicates that, in Peter's opinion, this message about Jesus ought to have resonated clearly and with certainty to a people who lived by a covenant heritage in which God was Father and who believed that the promises of His covenant with His people were surely to be fulfilled.

Peter reached His conclusion and declared: **God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.** God approved Him (v. 22), gave Him up (v. 23), raised Him up (vv. 24,32), exalted Him (v. 33), and crowned Him (v. 36). God was behind it all. How could a people who claimed to be a covenant people refuse the One that God so affirmed? Peter's reference to their role in the crucifixion was a reminder that they had refused and rejected Jesus during His earthly ministry. To them, Jesus was a carpenter by vocation, an itinerant teacher by avocation, and a constant source of provocation. Oh, how they missed it! Jesus is **Lord and Christ!**

Nevertheless, they were being given another opportunity; this time to declare Him as **both Lord and Christ.** **Lord** can be understood at different levels. It is a title of respect. Jesus is worthy of that! It is a title given to someone who is supreme in authority. That too is true about Jesus. It refers to one to whom another person belongs and submits himself. As Lord, Jesus meets that definition as well. But ultimately, in the highest sense of the word, **Lord** is a declaration that Jesus is the full manifestation of God given to humankind. Jesus is God! He also is the **Christ** ("Messiah," HCSB), the Anointed One of God, who was sent to accomplish the Father's purpose and plan to create a people who would bring glory to His holy name.

What are some lasting truths from Acts 2:32-33,36?

1. By faith, we bear witness of the truth that Jesus lives!
2. The Father exalted the Son, Jesus, to a place of honor and glory at His right hand.
3. In Christ, the Holy Spirit is poured out on all who believe.
4. We can know with certainty that the crucified Jesus has been raised as Lord and Christ.

### **Acts 2:37-38**

**<sup>37</sup> Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? <sup>38</sup> Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost [Spirit].**

**The Message of Christ Calls for a Response.** How would they respond to this new opportunity presented to them? Apparently, they could not ignore the message: **Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart.** “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart” (ESV). They heard the words, but even more, they were touched by the Spirit behind them. Of course, the phrase **pricked in their heart** is to be understood metaphorically. The message stirred them emotionally and spiritually to the point of wanting to act on it. “When they heard this, they came under deep conviction” (HCSB).

Convicted as they were, they still needed guidance on how to respond to the message. Thus, they posed a question **unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles.** As we often see in the Gospel narratives, Peter stepped forward as the spokesman for the other apostles, but that did not mean he was better than they were or that they were disinterested or uninvolved. This was not just Peter’s gospel; it was an apostolic witness.

The hearers’ question was, **Men and brethren, what shall we do?** Perhaps they called them “brothers” (HCSB) because of their common nationalism—fellow Jews—but maybe under the convicting power of the Holy Spirit they already had sensed a spiritual kinship

with these followers of Christ. **What shall we do?** In defense of our belief in salvation by grace apart from works, we may tend to respond, “Nothing!” While true that we cannot save ourselves, there is action we must take. Peter was quick to point it out. (Also see Paul and Silas’s response to a similar question in 16:30-31.)

**Repent!** That is what anyone and everyone must do in response to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit within. Actually, the call to repent is not a new element of the divine message but is rooted deeply in the messages of the Old Testament prophets who issued a call to “return” or “repent” (see, for example, Isa. 44:22; Ezek. 24:14). **Repent** means “to change one’s mind for the better.” It is the spiritual equivalent of doing an about face. In repenting one acknowledges the presence of sin, turns away from sin, and turns to Christ for the blessing of salvation.

Then Peter continued, **Be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ.** Baptism is an act whereby an individual personally and publicly declares his or her repentance and faith in Christ. As a symbol, the believer identifies with Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection and affirms that in Christ he too has died to sin and been raised to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3-5). **The name of Jesus Christ** is a way of speaking about the complete personhood, claims, teachings, and authority of Christ.

Peter’s words **for the remission of sins** can be rendered “for the forgiveness of your sins” (NASB, NIV, HCSB, ESV). The word rendered **for** has been variously understood. Is it “for the purpose of” or “on basis of” forgiveness of sin? I agree with Bible expositor A. T. Robertson. “My view is decidedly against the idea that Peter, Paul, or any one in the New Testament taught baptism as essential to the remission of sins or the means of securing such remission. So I understand Peter to be urging baptism on each of them who had already turned (repented) and for it to be done in the name of Jesus Christ on the basis of the forgiveness of sins which they had already received.”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, Peter added, **Ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost** [Spirit]. With the forgiveness of sins comes **the gift of the Holy Ghost** [Spirit]. This is not a separate event or experience. The Spirit is involved in forgiveness, making possible spiritual cleansing, regeneration, and transformation. The Spirit indwells believers and

**THE POINT:** *Jesus died for our sins, rose again, and reigns as Lord.*

serves to seal, or guarantee, conversion; empowers them for the life of faith; gifts them for ministry; and unites them as one in the body of Christ, the church.

What are some lasting truths from Acts 2:37-38?

1. The Word of the Lord delivered in the power of the Spirit brings conviction and calls for the response of personal repentance.
2. Repentance leads to baptism as a public confession of one's faith.
3. God pours out His Spirit on those who repent of their sins and confess that Jesus is the Christ.

## LIVE IT OUT

The message matters. Without the message of Jesus, the church cannot exist. Without a message, the mission fails. When the mission fails, Christ is dishonored. Believers need to understand the message and to be able to articulate it clearly. When that message of salvation is proclaimed, it will make an eternal difference in the lives of those who receive it by faith. It is a message of salvation that will not stop!

*Are you able to share the message of salvation based on the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ?* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*With whom might you share it this week?* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

<sup>1</sup>William J. Larkin, Jr., *Acts*, in The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, vol. 5 [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995], 55.

<sup>2</sup>Larkin, *Acts*, 55.

<sup>3</sup>John B. Polhill, "Acts," in *The New American Commentary*, vol. 26 [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992], 112.

<sup>4</sup>A. T. Robertson, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *Word Pictures of the New Testament*, vol. III [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930], 36.

# SESSION 9

## UNSTOPPABLE LOVE

### THE PASSAGE

Acts 2:41-47

### THE POINT

Loving people is a powerful expression of loving God.

### THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

The United States is well known for its humanitarian aid to other countries, and its citizens give to a host of organizations seeking to alleviate various forms of suffering. While the motives for giving to these groups may vary, giving within the church is motivated by love, a love for Christ expressed in love for other persons. Out of their common love for Jesus, the early church expressed love for each other.

### THE SETTING

The effectiveness of Peter's preaching under the power of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost is seen in the great number of people who believed in the Lord in response to his message. "The church was not only surviving, but it also was growing."<sup>1</sup> The growth was not only external and numerical, it was internal and spiritual. In the first of several summary statements Luke included in the Book of Acts, he described what it was like to be a maturing, worshiping, growing, and loving church.

## STUDY THE BIBLE

During Jesus' last evening with His disciples prior to His arrest and execution, He said, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:34-35). While the Scripture verses for this session do not repeat any of those statements and do not even contain the word *love*, what they describe are a people who not only understood what Jesus meant but were determined to put His instructions into practice in the way they treated one another. The way they treated each other did not go unnoticed by those outside the body of believers. They, too, saw love expressed in action and were impressed by it.

The young church at Jerusalem demonstrated love in three ways. First, they gave spiritual support to each other. They were focused on building up one another in the things of the Lord. Second, they gave material support to one another. Those who had material resources gladly and generously shared those resources with those who were without the things that were needed to sustain life. Third, their loving spirit must have carried over in the way they related to others, for all the people were impressed by them and drawn to their fellowship.

This session can teach us how to be the kind of people Jesus wanted His disciples to be. And we can identify some practical ways to embody the gospel message both inside and outside the church.

### **Acts 2:41-42**

**<sup>41</sup> Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. <sup>42</sup> And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.**

**Unstoppable Love Meets Spiritual Needs.** Just as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit poured down on all the disciples assembled together on the day of Pentecost. Peter boldly preached the gospel and called for people to make a decision. His message was not an easy one; the call to repentance never is. Those who **gladly received his word were baptized, and about three thousand souls were added**

to the church. **Souls** means “persons.” Here we see the power of the preached word of God in bringing people to saving faith.

Note that those who **were baptized** were those who **received his** (Peter’s) **word**, or “who accepted his message” (HCSB); hence, this was “believers’ baptism,” not the way into salvation. They believed what they heard and trusted in the Christ who was the subject of the proclamation. In baptism, they identified themselves with Christ and with His church as the community of those who believe. In the early church, baptism in the name of Jesus was a one-time event, not a ritual to be repeated.

Four practices are identified in verse 42 that contributed to spiritual growth and development; congregational unity; and numerical, ministry, and missional expansion in the early church: teaching, worship, fellowship, and prayer. These practices continue to be critical to the effectiveness of the contemporary church. Let’s examine them to identify some transferable principles that transcend time and culture, and therefore, have relevance for our day.

First, **they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine**. “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (NASB). **They** refers to all the believers, specifically the recent converts but also those believers who had been involved from the beginning. No one is outside the realm of needing to learn more about Jesus. **Continued steadfastly** comes from a word that means “to persevere, to be constantly diligent, and to adhere closely to.” Actually, it may well describe the way the people approached all four of the practices.

Perhaps one of the great weaknesses of the contemporary church is its lack of emphasis on teaching and learning doctrines of the faith. As William Willimon reminded us: “The church is not to drift from one momentary emotional outburst to the next, to resuscitate Pentecost on a weekly basis; rather the church moves immediately to the task of teaching, keeping itself straight about what it is and what it is to be about.”<sup>2</sup> The church at Jerusalem understood that responsibility. Rather than bask in the Spirit, it moved by the Spirit to teach. It was to the fullest a teaching-learning body.

Therefore, wherever and whenever opportunities existed, the apostles gathered the people to teach them the dynamic truth of the gospel and its significance for life. They didn’t teach what they



thought would be popular; they taught what they knew the people needed. They shared their witness and passed on the instructions they had received from the Lord. **The apostles' doctrine** refers to "the apostles' teaching" (ESV), that is, to the teaching of those who had followed Jesus during His sojourn on earth, had seen the resurrected Lord, and had observed His ascension into heaven (1:22). It probably included a compilation of the sayings of Jesus and the apostles' account and interpretation of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The actual act of teaching apparently took place in larger assemblies in the temple courts as well as in smaller groups in the homes of believers.

Next, **they continued steadfastly in ... fellowship.** Fellowship is the Greek word *koinonia*. The word is familiar to many in church settings, but the full meaning of the concept has not always been understood. *Koinonia* at its root comes from a word that means "common." It suggests a close mutual relationship and participation in life together. In fact, *The Message* paraphrases the word as "the life together." Other New Testament words that come from the same root are *partnership*, *communion*, and *sharing*. The word suggests the distinctive nature of the gathering of the believers that was recognized by others and that set them apart from other groups or assemblies. Verses 44-45 will shed some additional light on the practical meaning of fellowship in the life of the church.

Views vary as to what is meant by **breaking of bread**. The words may refer to the practice of sharing meals together (see v. 46). Even in our day, we know by experience the joy that comes from gathering around the table with people we love and with whom we have things in common. Relationships tend to thrive in that kind of setting or other settings in which believers have opportunity to interact with each other.

Other Bible interpreters think that **breaking of bread** is a reference to the observance of the Lord's Supper. In that case, the Lord's Supper would provide a time of worship and instruction as they recalled the death of Jesus, reflected on the meaning of discipleship, and remembered they had been made one in Christ.

Still other Bible interpreters think **breaking of bread** refers to a combination of fellowship meals and participation in the Lord's Supper. I tend to think that is the case. The church at this early stage had not

become so formalized as to make a distinction between a ritual observance and the table of fellowship. This seems to be what Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. We ought not to impose our church structure on the early church. In fact, it ought to be the other way around.

Finally, the young church was a praying church. **Prayers** could refer to formal prayers in the context of worship in the temple or to small group prayer meetings conducted in the homes of the believers. The point is that they were in constant conversation with the Lord. As William Barclay observed, “These early Christians knew that they could not meet life in their own strength and that they did not need to. They always spoke to God before they spoke with men; they always went in to God before they went out to the world; they could meet the problems of life because they had first met God.”<sup>3</sup> People who pray to their Father together cannot help but develop deep connections with each other.

What are some last truths from Acts 2:41-42?

1. The preached word is powerful in its effects, bringing about spiritual transformation.
2. The church of the Lord Jesus is not a static organization but a growing body.
3. The church is to be committed to teaching truth, building fellowship, communing in Christ, and praying faithfully.
4. Godly love will express itself as we build up and encourage one another in the things of the Lord.

### **Acts 2:43-45**

**<sup>43</sup> And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> And all that believed were together, and had all things common; <sup>45</sup> and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.**

**Unstoppable Love Meets Physical Needs.** The practices of the believers became an element of their witness before others—**Fear came upon every soul.** **Fear** in this setting may best be understood as “awe.” “Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe” (NASB). **Every soul**, or “everyone” (NIV, HCSB), may refer to those outside the Christian

community who observed the lives of the believers; but as well, it may describe the feelings of the believers as they reflected on the divine manifestation that brought them into being as a people.

**Many wonders and signs were done by the apostles**, or “were being performed through the apostles” (HCSB). **Wonders** (*terata*) refers to miraculous acts, especially healings. The word is not used alone in the Book of Acts but always is coupled with the word rendered **signs** (*semeia*), indicating that there is no real point to merely observing **wonders** if they do not point to something beyond themselves. **Signs** were remarkable occurrences that point to something beyond themselves. **Wonders and signs** served to authenticate that the apostles were indeed sent by God just as they claimed; however, the focus, particularly in their preaching, was that they were not the ones who did the mighty things but the Christ whom they served.

The fellowship of the early church not only included being **together**, but also holding and sharing **all things in common**, even to the degree that they **sold their possessions and goods, and parted them**, or distributed the proceeds, **to all men, as every man had need**. If any distinction is to be made between **possessions** and **goods**, **possessions** might be land and **goods** other valuable items or “belongings” (ESV). “They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as anyone had a need” (HCSB). “They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (NIV).

The intent behind this practice was not to equalize the community economically but to meet needs that existed among believers who may have been excluded from the marketplace by those who resented and opposed their commitment to Christ. These early believers deep association, partnership, and commitment to share with each other was not forced upon them. Such an attitude reflected the kind of love, devotion, and oneness that comes by having become one in the Spirit. If the contemporary church is to be like the early church, then it, too, is to have a commitment to each other that is supported by a willingness to provide for others during seasons of need.

What are some lasting truths from Acts 2:43-45?

1. Sometimes God chooses to use human beings as the instruments through which He does His mighty work.
2. The witness of the church is strengthened when those outside the church see how believers care for one another.

3. All that we have is to be dedicated to the service of the Lord.
4. Believers model life in Christ when they show how to live and love one another.

### **Acts 2:46-47**

**<sup>46</sup> And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, <sup>47</sup> praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.**

**Unstoppable Love Shares the Gospel.** The growing number of believers in Jerusalem gathered **daily with one accord**, or “day by day continuing with one mind” (NASB). The gatherings took place in two settings: **in the temple** and **from house to house**. The believers sought to be faithful to their Jewish heritage. The early church did not see itself as an opponent of Judaism but its fulfillment. Because “the temple courts” (NIV) or “temple complex” (HCSB) provided places of assembly, it became an effective place to witness and teach the gospel. The people in the temple would have been people who were familiar with the revelation of God as made known in Scripture. They were looking for the Messiah to come. Believers in Christ were able to declare to them that the revelation had been fulfilled in Jesus, that He was the Christ for whom they had longed.

As in verse 42, the reference to **breaking bread** is variously interpreted. It may be a reference to the Lord’s Supper. The phrase **did eat their meat** could be another reference to a fellowship meal. Read together, the expressions may mean they did both in the same setting; they gathered for a meal at which they also observed the Supper (again, see 1 Cor. 11:17-34). This is the view of the NIV, which reads, “They broke bread in their homes and ate together.”

Meeting in homes for meals would seem logical and natural. These house meetings may have been the more intimate gatherings of the church, with the Lord’s Supper observance providing the setting to focus on praise and worship for what God had done in Christ to redeem them, and the fellowship meal the occasion to celebrate the fellowship they experienced with one another.

Nevertheless, whether the setting was the Lord's Supper, a fellowship meal, or both, they gathered in the right spirit—**with gladness and singleness of heart**. **Gladness** means more than with a casual or courteous smile that may characterize some of our current church gatherings. Rather, they gathered with a spirit of exultation or extreme joy. The word is often used in the New Testament in reference to exulting in God's acts. The community of believers rejoiced with gladness because they believed that what they were experiencing around them was nothing less than the work of God in their midst. **Singleness of heart** indicates sincerity and humility; they were transparent and honest in their worship of God and in their fellowship with each other. Other renderings include “with glad and sincere hearts” (NIV); “with a joyful and humble attitude” (HCSB); “with glad and generous hearts” (ESV).

These meetings of the believers were all opportunities for **praising God**. Praise, of course, is “to extol” or “to give honor to.” Behind the root word is the idea of “telling a story”—in this case, telling the story of what God had done on their behalf. Indeed, worship of God ought to include giving praise to Him and proclaiming a message about Him. Certainly, the greatest expression of love to those outside the church is to proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus to them.

All the activity of the believers contributed to their **having favor with all the people**, probably meaning the non-believing community. **Favor** is the same word from which the word *grace* is derived. In this case, it means the people around them were favorably impressed with their behavior and attitude. Such favorable impression would enhance their witness. The church was winsome rather than abhorrent; loving instead of hateful; attractive rather than repulsive.

**The Lord** honored their diligence in practice and faithfulness in living in that He **added to the church daily**. The growth of the earliest church was a divine action; moreover, it was constant. The phrase **such as should be saved** is a weak translation that implies that some should not be saved. A more accurate rendering is “those who were being saved” (NASB, NRSV, NIV, HCSB, ESV). The sense is that they were being **added** as they were being **saved**. (For further background, see the article “The Earliest Converts,” in the current Fall 2016 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*.)

What are some lasting truths from Acts 2:46-47?

1. Worshiping the Lord is to be a daily experience.
2. A fellowship of believers is made stronger when members give regular attention to maintaining their fellowship with an attitude of joy and humility.
3. Even those outside the church are attracted to a fellowship in which it is obvious that the members care for one another.
4. A growing church is the product of the Spirit’s continuous work in the lives of its members.

**LIVE IT OUT**

John Polhill provided an excellent summary of the verses in this session, especially focusing on verses 43-46, which “give an ideal portrait of the young Christian community, witnessing the Spirit’s presence in the miracles of the apostles, sharing their possessions with the needy among them, sharing their witness in the temple, sharing themselves in the intimacy of their table fellowship. Their common life was marked by praise of God, joy in the faith, and sincerity of heart. And in it all they experienced the favor of the nonbelievers and continual blessings of God-given growth. It was an ideal, almost blissful time marked by the joy of their life together and the warmth of the Spirit’s presence among them.”<sup>4</sup>

Such a church is a church filled with love for the Lord, love for each other, and love for those still standing in need of a saving relationship with Christ. Such love must not be stopped!

*Which attributes of the early church in Jerusalem are evident in your church?* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*How would you explain the deficiencies and what would need to take place to overcome them?* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**THE POINT: *Loving people is a powerful expression of loving God.***

*Which ministries does your church have in place to help believers mature in their faith, be taught the doctrines of the church, be strengthened in the fellowship, and become engaged in the practice of prayer?* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Which procedures, processes, and ministries does your church have in place to provide support for those who are struggling with basic human needs?* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*What can you or your Bible study group do to help address spiritual and physical needs among group members or other members of the church body?* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*If you agree that the greatest expression of love is to share the gospel of Jesus, in what ways are you doing so?* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

<sup>1</sup>*Holman Bible Handbook*, David S. Dockery, general editor [Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992], 638.

<sup>2</sup>William H. Willimon, *Acts*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988], 40.

<sup>3</sup>William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, in *The Daily Study Bible Series, Second Edition* [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955], 26.

<sup>4</sup>John B. Polhill, "Acts," in *The New American Commentary*, vol. 26 [Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 1992], 122.

# SESSION 10

## UNSTOPPABLE OPPORTUNITIES

### THE PASSAGE

Acts 3:1-10

### THE POINT

We intersect daily with people who need Christ.

### THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Whenever you drive any distance at all, you pass intersection after intersection. At times, you may pass through those intersections without noticing what is around. These intersections are like our lives. Every day we intersect with people, but we should take the time to notice them without simply passing by. God puts us on this pathway to impact and influence lives along our journey. Intersections become opportunities.

### THE SETTING

Followers of Christ did not think they were beginning a new religious movement. They did not perceive their message to be in opposition to Judaism but the fulfillment of it. Therefore, the early believers in Jerusalem continued to assemble at the temple as a faithful expression of their Jewish heritage. Furthermore, the other people who gathered for prayer, sacrifice, and worship were a prime audience for the gospel message that Jesus' followers were eager to share. The regular temple worshippers were familiar with the revelation made known in Scripture—the powerful message of the prophets. Therefore, they lived in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. The gospel message declared



that the prophecies concerning the Messiah had been fulfilled in Jesus. Acts 3 records the story of two followers of Christ—Peter and John—who saw a great opportunity to share their message in a powerful way. Their witness was powerful in its effect.

## STUDY THE BIBLE

One afternoon when Peter and John were going to the temple to pray, they encountered a lame beggar who had been brought to one of the temple gates. The lame man saw the two men approach him as an opportunity to receive a few coins. On the other hand, Peter and John saw the man as an opportunity to declare the life-changing message of Jesus. This story is the first public healing recorded in the Book of Acts. It also is a significant event in that it sets the stage for an initial challenge by the authorities that the followers of Jesus must cease their preaching and teaching. For the followers of Christ, it was a pivotal event setting the stage for them to affirm the depth of their commitment to Jesus as Lord (see Acts 4).

### **Acts 3:1-4**

**<sup>1</sup> Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour. <sup>2</sup> And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms of them that entered into the temple; <sup>3</sup> Who seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple asked an alms. <sup>4</sup> And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, Look on us.**

**See the Opportunity.** Peter and John's partnership in the gospel is rooted in the initial call they received (Mark 1:16-20). They had been partners in their fishing business, so it seemed natural they would be joined together in the call to "become fishers of men" (v. 17). Peter and John, along with John's brother James, have been called Jesus' "Inner Circle," because they witnessed special moments in Jesus' ministry (Mark 5:37; 9:2; 14:33). Peter and John followed Jesus the night of His arrest (John 18:15). They both ran to the garden tomb when a report came that the tomb where Jesus had been buried was empty (20:3-4).

Therefore, we are not surprised that **Peter and John went up together** to the temple complex.

The two men entered **the temple at the hour of prayer**. The 24-hour day was divided into two 12-hour periods, or watches, each beginning at 6 a.m. Thus, the daytime began at six in the morning. Therefore, the third hour of the day was 9 a.m.; the sixth hour, noon; and **the ninth hour**, three in the afternoon. Sacrifices were part of the morning and afternoon prayer times. Peter and John knew a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin was no longer necessary because the ultimate sacrifice had been made by Jesus. However, they could share in the prayers and look for opportunities to witness to people about the gospel.

Larger crowds were at the temple complex during prayer and sacrifice times. Therefore, it was a prime time for those dependent on the generosity of others to come to the temple complex as well. For the Jew, the giving of **alms** (gifts of charity)—either in the form of money or other acts of kindness—was a major mark of the righteous life. In fact, *righteousness* and *alms* became synonymous in first-century Judaism. Jesus endorsed the practice in His teaching in Matthew 6:1-4. Perhaps those who depended on the alms of others considered those coming to the temple to be more gracious—a softer touch as it were.

**A certain man lame from his mother’s womb was carried and laid daily at the gate of the temple.** The man’s lameness was a congenital defect; therefore, begging had been all he had known his entire adult life. (Acts 4:22 notes that he was 40 years of age.) It was his only way of making a living. However not only was he dependent on the generosity of others to give him money, he was dependent on the willingness of others to get him to the temple location. We don’t know who **they** were or whether the same people brought him there **daily** or if it was a shared responsibility. The verb tenses in verses 1 and 2 (“were going up” and “was being carried,” NIV, ESV) suggest that Peter, John, and the lame man were arriving about the same time.

We may tend to think of **the temple** as a large open room, much like our church auditoriums. It was not. The temple complex included the holy of holy, the holy place, altars, storage areas, several open courtyards, and balconies or porches all enclosed within the temple walls. Entrance into the temple complex overall and into internal areas was through one of the several gates set into the walls.

Luke recorded that the lame man was laid at the gate **called Beautiful**. Neither the Old Testament nor other sources identify a gate by this name. However, since the third century, it was been identified with the Shushan gate. But there are great difficulties with this identification. After explaining those difficulties, John Polhill, writing in *The New American Commentary*, said: “A more likely identification thus seems to be one of the gates that led into the sanctuary proper. Josephus spoke of ten gates in the sanctuary. Nine, he said, were overlaid with silver and gold; but the tenth ‘was of Corinthian bronze and far exceeded in value those plated with silver and set in gold.’ ... This seems to be the same gate identified in the rabbinic literature as the Nicanor gate.”<sup>1</sup> So *beautiful* could have been more a descriptor than a name. Whichever gate it was, it likely was a gate in a well-trafficked area of the complex.

The lame man may have learned to “size up” those coming and going into the temple, separating those who were in a hurry or those who obviously were ignoring his presence and pretending not to hear his call for alms. **Seeing**, or “when he saw” (NIV, HCSB), **Peter and John about to go into the temple**, the man **asked an alms**. “He began asking to receive alms” (NASB). “He asked them for money” (NIV). “He asked for help” (HCSB). If the three men were arriving about the same time, Peter and John may have been the first two individuals the lame man encountered that afternoon. Perhaps Peter and John had passed this man on other days as they had moved in and out of the temple complex. This day, however, would be different for the lame man and for Peter and John.

Those who gave the man some coins may have only tossed them to him or on the lap of his robe as they kept walking by. Peter and John stopped. **Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John**, spoke to him. Peter is always the spokesperson; John stands silently in the background. **Fastening his eyes** means “gazing intently,” as if not only to look at his face but to look deeper into his being. “But Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze on him” (NASB). “Peter looked straight at him, as did John” (NIV). Though John said nothing, he did the same. If they had seen the man before, this time they saw him differently. They saw a human being, not just a beggar. They saw someone with a need, but a need greater than what could be satisfied by giving him a coin.

Peter and John demanded his attention: **Look [at] us.** Was the man looking beyond them searching for the next person to whom he would direct his cries for alms? Was he not accustomed to looking at any of his benefactors because of feelings of humiliation over his life situation? No matter, Peter wanted his attention.

What are some lasting truths from Acts 3:1-4?

1. Believers are to gather for times of worship, but they also are to look for opportunities to represent Christ to those outside the church.
2. Some people live with problems beyond their own making and need the support of others.
3. Believers are to look at others with a compassion that probes beyond the surface need to identify the deeper needs in life.

### **Acts 3:5-8**

<sup>5</sup> **And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something of them.** <sup>6</sup> **Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.** <sup>7</sup> **And he took him by the right hand, and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength.** <sup>8</sup> **And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God.**

**Seize the Opportunity.** In response to Peter’s demand, **the man gave heed unto them.** To **heed** is “to give attention to.” “And he began to give them his attention” (NASB). “He fixed his attention on them” (ESV). “So he turned to them” (HCSB). The exhortation combined with what may have been an unusual attentiveness and the commanding presence of these two men convinced him to focus on them.

The lame man also did so because he was **expecting to receive** (“get,” NIV, HCSB) **something** [from] **them.** Of course, he expected money. He may have hoped to receive an amount much larger than normal, not just loose coins that he assumed were in Peter’s pouch but perhaps the whole pouch. Little did he know it would be greater than he might imagine. Thus, he was poised and ready—looking, listening, and eager to receive.

How his eagerness and expectation may have crashed when Peter spoke again, saying, **Silver and gold have I none.** “I have no silver and gold” (ESV). Maybe these thoughts raced through his mind: *No silver or gold? You mean you’re as broke as I am? Maybe even more, because I at least have a few coins in my lap. I have taken my attention off other potential benefactors to hear you admit your own desolate condition!* Then Peter continued, **but such as I have give I thee.** “What I do have I give to you” (NASB). Peter and John not only saw an opportunity, they were prepared to seize it, to make the most of it. Initially, the man may have further thought: *I see nothing else in your hand. What could you possibly have to offer me that I would want?*

What the lame man was about to receive would not be a temporary fix to his problem. Something was about to happen that would permanently change his life. Peter declared: **In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.** “In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!” (HCSB). Certainly, no one had ever made that offer to him before! And if someone had, obviously, it had been ineffective. In that culture a **name** was more than just the personal moniker used to identify and address an individual. **Name** represented a person’s whole being—reputation, thoughts, feelings, authority, power, character, spirit. This was not a magical incantation but an invocation calling upon the full authority and ability of Jesus. It was an expression of faith for Peter. And as Peter would make clear, neither he nor John did the healing. They were only the conduits through whom the power of the Lord flowed. **Jesus Christ of Nazareth** (“the Nazarene,” HCSB) calls attention to Jesus’ humanity and deity, His incarnation and exaltation. Something good had come from Nazareth after all; the anointed One of God.

**Rise up** means “to awaken, to arouse from sleep,” an apt command to one who had faced a lifetime of inactivity. **Walk** is the physical act—but figuratively could be a reference for “to live” or “to conduct one’s life.” The man’s ability to walk on his feet surely would allow him to live his life and conduct himself in ways he had never known.

Peter spoke the words—the right words—but his ministry was more than what he said, it included what he did: **He took him by the right hand, and lifted him up.** Perhaps, as was often the case with Jesus, the touch was a way of identifying with the person and his condition.

In addition, offering the man a hand to pull him up was an act of encouragement. Here is a man who had never stood, let alone walked. He may not have even known how to stand up. Peter represented someone who believed the man could do something he had never done because he was experiencing something he had never known.

**Lifted him up** is from the same Greek word as **rise up**. What Peter implored the man to do—**rise up**—he “helped” (NIV) him do—**he lifted him up**. How many new believers would be helped if we reached out to encourage them in their initial moment of conversion and as they began to learn to apply the truth of the gospel to their lives?

**Immediately**—“instantly” (NIV) or “at once” (HCSB)—a word that reinforces that this was a miraculous occurrence—**his feet and ankle bones received strength**, “were strengthened” (NASB) or “were made strong” (ESV). Did the man feel a surge of strength whereby the weakened bones were solidified and atrophied muscles were quickened? Perhaps, but what he felt in his bones was exceeded by what he felt in his heart. What he did next became an expression that he knew in his heart something wonderful had happened—**and he leaping up stood, and walked**. **Leaping** is “to spring forth.” Motivated by Peter’s command and encouraged by Peter’s helping hand, the man sprang to his feet. **Stood** implies stability; he was able to stand erect without wavering. Then he **walked** about. “He jumped up, stood, and started to walk” (HCSB). All his activity provides further proof that a miracle had occurred, one with all the signs of permanence, not a temporary fix or psychosomatic healing. The man put this newfound strength to the test!

Surely, jumping to his feet, standing, and walking were things he had dreamed of being able to do. Perhaps there had been one more thing he desired that could now come to pass. He **entered with them into the temple**. Because of his defect he was denied access to the inner courts of the temple (Lev. 21:17-20). With newfound vigor, he was able to walk alongside Peter, John, and other worshipers into the inner courts. Thus, his physical healing became a picture of spiritual acceptance. He was no longer an outcast but a member of the worshiping community.

Filled with joy, he began **walking, and leaping, and praising God**. The word for **leaping**, a slightly different word than the one

used earlier in the verse and a much rarer word (*hallomai*), means “to jump up,” “to spring up.” This word is used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) in Isaiah 35:6 when it says, “Then shall the lame man leap as an hart,” one of a series of verses that describe the messianic age. This man served as a sign that a new era long promised had come in Jesus Christ.

What are some lasting truths from Acts 3:5-8?

1. An opportunity seen is to be an opportunity seized.
2. Believers may have limited resources to help others, but they can share the special riches of love and grace available through Jesus Christ.
3. Our message of hope is to be accompanied by actions that encourage others to have faith.
4. The Lord’s work of grace and hope gives us cause to rejoice and praise God.
5. In Christ, the outcast finds acceptance.

### **Acts 3:9-10**

**<sup>9</sup> And all the people saw him walking and praising God: <sup>10</sup> And they knew that it was he which sat for alms at the Beautiful gate of the temple: and they were filled with wonder and amazement at that which had happened unto him.**

**Build on the Opportunity.** The man apparently was convinced that what had happened to him was nothing short of a work for which God was due praise. His **walking and praising God** drew the attention of **all the people** in the temple. Such commotion would naturally cause people to take notice. **They knew** who he was. They “recognized” (NIV, HCSB, ESV) him. **It was he which sat for alms at the Beautiful gate of the temple.** Because he was there daily (v. 2), they had seen him often. Therefore, “they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate call Beautiful” (NIV). We can only imagine that some had seen him and ignored him; others had given him coins. But be sure, none had ever seen him like this! What buzz there must have been!

What effect did this have on the people who witnessed it? These **people** were a worshipping people. We can safely say that many of

them probably were faithful to the requirements of the law. They would have known the Scriptures, and they would have shared in the longing for the Messiah to come. They would not have argued that a miracle had not taken place. After all, they knew what the lame man had been and could see what he had become. Obviously, something extraordinary **had happened unto him**.

In the sentence **they were filled with wonder and amazement**, **wonder** renders a Greek word that suggests being astonished and surprised to the point of being dumbfounded, awed by something witnessed. It is that state when we are at a loss for words to explain what we just saw. **Amazement** comes from a Greek word that can be seen in our English word *ecstatic*. It refers to the state of being lifted out of one's normal way of thinking into a state blended with awesome fear and wonderment. We might capture the essence of the word when we say, "I can't believe what I just saw!" The people in the temple were at a loss for words. They did not know what to think or how to begin to explain what they had just seen.

We ought not to confuse **wonder and amazement** with acceptance and faith, however. Being amazed does not necessarily mean belief. "Witnessing miracles may contribute to a person's embrace of faith, but it cannot produce faith (see Luke 16:31)."<sup>2</sup> The miracle must be interpreted in light of the gospel of Christ. As the story continued that was just what Peter did (vv. 12-26). Peter saw this as a moment to build on what the (formerly) lame man already had declared in his praise to God. This was a mighty work of God. God alone was to receive the credit, praise, and the glory.

What are a couple of lasting truths from Acts 3:9-10?

1. The amazing work of the Lord in our lives as believers will be evident to others.
2. Every marvelous work of the Lord creates another opportunity to bear witness for Him.

## LIVE IT OUT

Take note of the chain of events in this story in Acts 3. Peter and John, as followers of Christ, under the powerful indwelling of the Holy Spirit, shared Christ with a lame man. The Lord did a great work in healing the man. As a result, the man praised God so powerfully that others



were drawn to him and heard the message of Jesus as presented by Peter and John. This led to many others coming to believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

This story is an example of how God has chosen to do His work on this earth—one person comes to know hope in Christ and then he or she seizes an opportunity to share that hope with another—and so it is repeated again and again.

*Recall a time you had an unexpected encounter with someone that led to an opportunity—then or later—to offer a word of hope in Christ.* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*What did you learn from that experience that was helpful to you in preparing for other unexpected encounters?* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Consider those places where you have opportunity to intersect with others who need a word of hope. How can you take advantage of the opportunities they provide?* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*List the names of a few persons you know who need a word of hope and an act of encouragement that you could provide.*  
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<sup>1</sup> John B. Polhill, “Acts,” vol. 26, in *The New American Commentary* [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992], 126-127, citing Josephus, *Wars*, 5.201.

<sup>2</sup> William J. Larkin, Jr., *Acts*, in *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995], 66.