

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 8, Chapter 3 continued

Last week we concluded chapter 2 and began chapter 3 of Acts. And what we observed was that when we take these verses within the context of the 2nd Temple Judaism of Jesus's era, and understand what the cultural mindset and backdrop was for the Bible characters involved and for the author (Luke), only then does the meaning pour forth.

For instance; near of the end of Acts chapter 2 Peter uses the term "the promise" as the basis for how he interprets the works and person of Yeshua the Messiah. And it isn't necessarily in line with what we might think. Often in Christianity it is said that what Peter is getting at is that "the promise" is referring to the New Covenant in Christ. And thus, the New Covenant is unilateral; that is in the New Covenant only God has obligations. The Believer has none. Yet in fact, what Peter is alluding to is not the New Covenant, but rather a much more ancient one: the Abrahamic Covenant.

The term "the promise" had for centuries been the nickname for the Abrahamic Covenant. And indeed it was a promise to Abraham that was unilateral; that is, all of its obligations fell to God. However the New Covenant is anything but unilateral nor is it a promise on the order of the Abrahamic Covenant. So Peter lays out some very specific requirements to take advantage of the new dynamic brought about by Yeshua's death and resurrection. First, one must actively turn from their sins. Second, one must sincerely return to God. And third, one must be physically baptized on the authority of Messiah Yeshua. These were 3 strict conditions for forgiveness, and thus salvation. So indeed Believers in Jesus had, and continue to have, obligations for membership to the community of Believers.

In that same vein it is often said that the New Covenant is all about grace, while another earlier covenant (the Mosaic Covenant) was about works; this is a false dichotomy. Both covenants were based on grace, because both covenants were based on the theological concept of substitution of an innocent victim in place of the guilty perpetrator. The primary difference was that the older covenant required the life of an animal as a substitute each time atonement was needed, while the newer covenant required the life of Messiah as a one-time substitute. And, as concerns the Law, what could demonstrate more grace than for God to let the guilty human being live while an innocent animal died in his/her place? Further, repentance was equally required for both covenants. An animal sacrifice without repentance was not effectual. Saying one believes in Yeshua for salvation, but without true repentance, is equally ineffectual.

What we also saw was that true repentance (the kind that provides forgiveness of sins) is first and foremost an action. There must be life changes; mere words and feelings will not do. Past transgressions must end.

Then in chapter 2 verse 39 we have Peter explaining just who “the promise” was extended to. And his answer was to those near and to those far away. In the context of that era, and to Peter’s mind, the near were those Jews standing before him, and the far away were all the Jews and Israelites of the Diaspora. He was not thinking of, or speaking about, gentiles at all at this time, and in fact some months later he was still not thinking that gentiles were to be included. Then in Acts chapter 10 we’ll find God using a dream-vision to finally get it across to Peter that the promise to Abraham was to be extended to all the families of the earth, not just to Jews.

Acts 10:34-35 CJB ³⁴ Then Kefa addressed them: "I now understand that God does not play favorites, ³⁵ but that whoever fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him, no matter what people he belongs to.

Next, still in chapter 2, we discussed the concept of breaking of bread and found that it had nothing to do with a Christian tradition that was formed a few centuries after Peter’s day. That tradition was invented by the Roman Church and called the Sacrament of Communion. The breaking of bread was a regular, long established, Jewish tradition of first saying a blessing over the bread at mealtime, and then literally breaking it into pieces to pass it around to the diners. Communion and the breaking of bread are in no way connected.

Lastly we moved into chapter 3 and the story of the healing miracle of a crippled man. We just got started last week and didn't get much past the first couple of verses, so we'll re-read this chapter in its entirety. Open your Bibles to Acts chapter 3.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 3 all

Scholars say that what is happening in this chapter is that Peter is outlining his Christology. Christology is one of the several categories and subject headings that helps to define any particular Christian systematic theology. It a big word that simply means the religious doctrines that may be derived from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. And I would agree that Christology is definitely contained in this chapter. However what is often lumped in with Christology are rather standard Jewish understandings and doctrines derived from the Torah and from the traditions of Judaism. But because they occur in the New Testament, these beliefs are often thought to be something new that Yeshua taught (perhaps even different from the Torah). Some of these doctrines are quite important as they are foundational to our proper understanding of Messiah and of redemption. So we will take some time to examine these.

Essentially what we have here in our story is a divine miracle to heal a cripple, but it is done for a larger purpose than making the lame to walk. It is done both as a demonstration of God's healing power, through Yeshua, but it also gives Peter a platform to preach and teach the Gospel.

The cripple was sitting at a gate called the Beautiful Gate that led into the Court of the Women; it was one of the main entrances into the Temple complex. He would have been outside the gate and not inside, as the lame were considered too blemished to be allowed too near the Temple itself. Not even blemished Levites and Priests were allowed inside the Temple precinct as it introduced ritual impurity to the sacred area. This crippled man was a beggar because he had no other means to survive. And because so many people passed through this particular gate, it was prime real estate for beseeching alms. We should not think that begging was somehow a bad thing; ironically Judaism actually saw giving to beggars as a way to achieve merit before God. Thus there was a mindset that beggars served an important purpose in Jewish society by providing a means for other Jews to practice an important Torah principle: ***tzedekah***. ***Tzedekah*** means charity. Beggar and giver formed a kind of symbiotic relationship such that if there were no poor and lame beggars, then Jews couldn't perform the required

charity. In the Babylonian Talmud tractate **Baba Bathra**, we read this excerpt that well sums up how 2nd Temple Judaism viewed giving to beggars.

In response to criticism from gentiles that challenged the Jewish concept of **tzedekah** in that “If your God loves the poor, why does He not support them?” the Hebrew Sages replied: “So that through giving to them we may be saved from the punishment of Gehinnom”. Gehinnom is another way of saying Hell. In other words, **tzedekah** had a certain salvation component to it in the minds of many Jewish religious authorities of that era, and so beggars were a necessarily thing so **tzedekah** could happen.

As this particular beggar spotted Peter and John walking by him he stretched out his hand as usual hoping for some coins. However instead of giving him money, Kefa (Peter) offered something unexpected. When we read in verse 4 that Kefa and Yochanon (John) stared at the beggar, this was not a glare of disapproval; rather they must have felt an unction from the Holy Spirit to do something truly awesome for this unfortunate individual. Eye contact is a powerful thing; by staring into the eyes of this beggar, they made a personal connection. They explain that they won't be giving him any money because they don't have any. However they will give him something valuable that they do possess and are able to give; something even greater than charity.

Peter reached out his own hand and grasped the hand of the cripple and said: “In the name of Yeshua of Nazareth, walk!”. He pulled on the man, encouraging him to stand, and miraculously he did just that. In fact after feeling the sensation of standing for the first time in his life, he began to walk, and then soon began to leap around all the time praising God. Let's remember that not only had he never, since birth, had the ability to walk, his legs would have been horrifically atrophied. So the Lord not only repaired whatever was impairing his mobility, He also instantaneously strengthened those rubbery muscles and ligaments.

It is no accident that the term “leaping” is employed to describe how this former cripple reacted. A Messianic prophecy well known in Peter's day is found in the Book of Isaiah that predicts exactly this. It is as beautifully lyrical as a Psalm of David and worth a few minutes to read it all.

READ ISAIAH 35 all

So when the people saw this man crippled from birth leaping around like a deer,

many would have recognized it as a Messianic prophetic fulfillment, which is of course what God intended and indeed it was. And Peter made it clear that this healing was in the name of Yeshua. Notice also that only AFTER he was healed did the lame man enter the Temple grounds. To repeat: no blemished person, not even a Levite, could enter the Temple grounds because it brought defilement to the holiness of the place. So for the first time in his life this man could enter into the Temple and he could offer sacrifices of atonement at the Altar. Think on that for a moment; his crippled condition also meant he had no avenue to atone for his sins. What a great picture this paints of the purpose for the Law of Moses, which was provided for God's crippled people as a means to have atonement for their sins; a means that had not before existed. And then later, through Yeshua, an ever greater means was provided for the entire crippled world of humanity to atone for our sins.

Let's take a bit of a detour at this time to talk about a challenging subject that is brought up as early in the Bible as the Torah and continues on throughout the New Testament; the relationship between sin and sickness. I ask for all your attention and concentration because this is not easy, which is why it is not often talked about in our Synagogues and Churches except only in the simplest terms.

Depending on the various denominational views, committing sinful acts either is or **is not** a direct cause of physical sickness. And various Bible verses can be found to support either doctrine. Here's an example of a passage that seems to favor believing that sinful acts DO cause sickness.

^{CJB} John 5:1 *After this, there was a Judean festival; and Yeshua went up to Yerushalayim. ² In Yerushalayim, by the Sheep Gate, is a pool called in Aramaic, Beit-Zata, ³ in which lay a crowd of invalids- blind, lame, crippled. ⁴ * ⁵ One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁸ Yeshua said to him, "Get up, pick up your mat and walk!" ⁹ Immediately the man was healed, and he picked up his mat and walked. ¹⁴ Afterwards Yeshua found him in the Temple court and said to him, "See, you are well! Now stop sinning, or something worse may happen to you!"*

But in another passage that seems to say something entirely different, we read words that imply that sinning is not necessarily tied directly to sickness or disability.

CJB John 9:1 As Yeshua passed along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His talmidim asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned- this man or his parents- to cause him to be born blind?" ³ Yeshua answered, "His blindness is due neither to his sin nor to that of his parents; it happened so that God's power might be seen at work in him.

Further, depending on denominational views, since God is able to heal then a Believer either prays AND seeks medical help, or one should ONLY pray and shun medical help; the idea being that seeking a human to heal us signifies a lack of faith in God. We'll deal with both of these matters because it is profoundly important to our story and to our lives.

The first thing to know about sin and sickness is that from a Biblical perspective they both represent a lack of wholeness. Sin is the lack of spiritual wholeness; sickness is the corresponding lack of physical wholeness. And what we learn in Scripture is that the lack of spiritual and physical wholeness is connected and work hand-in-hand. We also learn from the Bible that the lack of wholeness is an affront to the Lord and so He has set down rules and regulations regarding it. In fact Yehoveh has set up a barrier between him and un-whole mankind because He can't have un-whole anything in His presence as the lack of wholeness defiles holiness. Therefore Heaven is a place divided and separated away (protected) from the entire physical universe, and for humans the boundary between the two cannot be crossed over without very specific circumstances occurring. Those circumstances are 1) our physical death, and 2) righteousness imputed to us (God's Believers) by divine grace, and this through God's son Yeshua.

Thus, for instance, when I told you that a Levite or Priest with a blemish (like a missing finger, or a substantial burn, or a crippled foot) cannot serve at the Temple, it is because of this principle of wholeness. Essentially the purpose for redemption is create wholeness in people who are not whole; and everyone is born "not whole", both spiritually and physically, because of the Fall of Adam and Eve. Let me say it again because it is one of the most critical and least talked about Biblical principles of God: redemption is NOT the goal in and of itself; rather redemption is the **means** to the goal. The purpose and goal of redemption is the restoration of wholeness to humanity.

Thus when sin (a spiritual element) entered the physical world, so did its counterpart, sickness and death. One of the several outstanding things that

Messiah Yeshua's death on the cross did was to pay or atone not only for our sins (that is our wrong behaviors or wrong attitudes that go against the Torah), His sacrificial death also paid for our condition of sin, or our sin nature, that we all are born with. That is, a newborn infant is born with a sin nature before he/she even has an opportunity to commit a sinful act. The Levitical system of Altar sacrifices could pay ONLY for sinful acts; not for our sin nature. And even then, not ALL sinful acts could be atoned for. Christ's death covered it all, so indeed it is vastly superior to anything that the death of an animal could atone for. But let me also be clear: the Law of Moses and the accompanying sacrificial system using animals for atonement worked. Over and over in the Torah after explaining a law, and what the requisite sacrifice was to atone for breaking that law, it was directly said that provided the sacrifice was done with an attitude of repentance, the sinner was forgiven. However it had its limitations.

Thus sickness is the tangible physical manifestation of the invisible spiritual condition of sin. It is once again an example of our Reality of Duality principle; the spiritual world and the physical world operating in lock step. We get a dramatic illustration of this in the Torah concerning Miryam, Moses' sister.

Numbers 12:6-10 CJB ⁶ *He said, "Listen to what I say: when there is a prophet among you, I, ADONAI, make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. ⁷ But it isn't that way with my servant Moshe. He is the only one who is faithful in my entire household. ⁸ With him I speak face to face and clearly, not in riddles; he sees the image of ADONAI. So why weren't you afraid to criticize my servant Moshe?" ⁹ The anger of ADONAI flared up against them, and he left. ¹⁰ But when the cloud was removed from above the tent, Miryam had tzara'at, as white as snow. Aharon looked at Miryam, and she was as white as snow.*

Thus Miryam's hidden spiritual condition became apparent on the outside of her body for all to see: sickness in the form of a skin disease. And so it is the same for all mankind. We get physically sick because we are spiritually sick. And while we can certainly mitigate part of that by not committing sins, we cannot fully mitigate the other part, which is our sin natures. Those sin natures will stay with us until we die; and then if we are Believers we will someday return to earth with glorified bodies that have different natures. Only then will we no longer be subject to sickness, because only then we will no longer be subject to sin.

One more interesting bit of information. Wholeness, or restoration to perfect

health, is in Greek ***holoklerian***. It means to bring something to sound well-being and thus complete health. In the Greek version of the Old Testament called the Septuagint, this rarely used word refers to an unblemished animal that is thus qualified for sacrifice because of its soundness. That is, the animal is suitable for use by God because it is whole. It works the same with humans. A human must be brought to ***holoklerian***, wholeness, in order to be useable for God.

Now for the 2nd part of the matter of sin and sickness: as a practical issue what are Believers to do when we inevitably get physically sick? The reality is that the Biblical attitude towards healers, medicine men, and physicians was strongly negative. In the Torah, for instance, we read this about healing from sickness or injury:

Deuteronomy 32:39 CJB ³⁹ ***See now that I (God), yes, I, am he; and there is no god beside me. I put to death, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal; no one saves anyone from my hand!***

Here's another example:

2 Chronicles 16:12-13 CJB ¹² ***In the thirty-ninth year of his reign, Asa suffered from a disease in his legs. It was a very serious disease, yet even with this disease he did not seek out ADONAI but turned to the physicians.*** ¹³ ***Asa slept with his ancestors, dying in the forty-first year of his reign.***

And in a famous saying of Christ in the Book of Luke:

Luke 4:23 CJB ²³ ***Then Yeshua said to them, "No doubt you will quote to me this proverb- "'Doctor, cure yourself!"***

There was a prevailing attitude among the Hebrews both ancient and in Peter's day that practicing healing was part magic, part medicine, and short on miracle and faith. Jews were from skeptical to fearful of Doctors. It was by firm reliance on the healing power of the Lord that the Israelites depended. The Jews all the more despised the Greeks and Romans because the occupation of physician was usual and normal in their pagan Hellenistic society; medicine was already an ancient practice. Yet, beginning about 100 years before Christ, doctors among the Hebrews started to make headway and were seen less as heretics to the Jewish religious faith and increasingly as an extension of God's healing hand on

earth. Thus even the author of the Book of Acts, Luke, a man called a God-fearer who accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys, is explicitly labeled as a physician. And obviously he was well accepted as there is no evidence that he had to give up his occupation in order to join the community of Believers.

As with all changes within a society, attitude evolution is slow and so both viewpoints of Doctors being counter-to-God and being an agent of God existed at the same time. In the Book of Apocrypha known both as Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Sirach, chapter 38, we see an example of this more accepting attitude of medical practitioners exist alongside the traditional bent against Doctors:

My son, in thy sickness be not negligent but pray to the Lord, and He will make thee whole. Leave off from sin, and order thy hands aright, and cleanse thy heart from all wickedness. Give a sweet savor (an animal sacrifice) and a memorial of fine flour (the usual Minchah offering that goes with an animal sacrifice); and make a fat offering..... (But) he that sinneth before his Maker let him fall into the hand of the physician”.

So the idea is that if a person is righteous before the Lord, then they should seek healing solely by the Lord. But if a person was an unrepentant sinner then they should seek a human physician. Thus there was an acknowledgment that physicians could indeed legitimately heal, even if they weren't very respected by the more pious Jews. In time we find some well known Rabbis becoming renowned Doctors, especially as the Jewish people began to adopt the viewpoint that medicine and the skill of a physician was itself a gift of kindness and provision from the Lord. In the end, both mainstream Judaism and Christianity have decided that prayer and medicine are a good prescriptive combination for battling sickness (although, in what proportion is hardly broadly agreed to and in some cases medicine is still shunned as an affront to God.)

What this tells us is that Peter and John would have been immediately labeled as Jewish healers by the Jews who witnessed the formerly lame man become fully healed. The 2 disciples tried to deflect that by quickly announcing that the healing was an issue of faith in God, through Yeshua, and thus a divine miracle; they weren't physicians or practitioners of magic.

We'll continue with Acts chapter 3 next time and get into additional important doctrinal principles introduced by Peter.

