

OPENING THE FLOODGATES

The book of Acts records the story of the early church and the remarkable spread of the gospel, through the testimony of a small group of very ordinary people.

"[Jesus] said to them ..'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you: and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'" [Acts 1.8]

The story is one of the floodgates of heaven being opened, and a great river of grace flowing across a dry and thirsty humanity – fulfilling in a wonderful way the Lord's words through Isaiah –

"I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams." [Is.44.3f]

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The aim of our studies over these weeks is to learn together how those floodgates may be opened again in our own context; for our land today is similarly parched, and as thirsty as ever for the Lord Himself. We'll hope to get, and then share, feedback from the different Community Groups, so that together we can hear what the Spirit is saying to us as a fellowship through His Word.

Perhaps the prayer which should be on all our hearts through these studies, therefore, is best expressed in the words of the following song, first penned some 30 years ago –

*Lord, we long for You to move in power
There's a hunger deep within our hearts
To see healing in our nation: send Your Spirit to revive us*

*Heal our nation, Heal our nation, Heal our nation
Pour out Your Spirit on this land*

*Lord we hear Your Spirit, coming closer
A mighty wave to break upon our land
Bringing justice, and forgiveness: God we cry to You, 'Revive us'*

*Heal our nation, Heal our nation, Heal our nation
Pour out Your Spirit on this land*

2.

“..by faith in the name of Jesus ..”

Acts 3.1-4.22

The first incident recorded for us in the life of the early church serves to define what the ministry of Jesus' church will be. It's a *“this-is-who-we-are-and-this-is-what-we-do”* sort of statement: like a prism through which light is made visible, this incident provides a graphic illustration of the work of the unseen Spirit of God in and through His church.

Chapter 2 ends with the great statement – *“The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved”* [Acts 2.47]. Here, then, is the sort of way in which this happened! When the Spirit of God is at work, anything can happen: let's be expectant!

1. Read all of chapters 3 & 4: it's really one continuous narrative and the time taken to read it all prior to this study will be well worth it!

As you reflect on these two chapters, what impresses you most about the life of the early church?

2. Read 3.1-11. The choice of this incident as the starting point for Luke's account of the ministry of the early church is clearly deliberate: for the vivid account of this man being healed portrays the essence of all gospel ministry.

In what ways does the crippled man provide a picture of our 'natural' state outside of Christ? (vv.1-5)

What do the actions of Peter and John teach us about what Jesus' ministry through His church will look like? (vv.3-7)

We're to expect and pray for conversions! Look at the closing verses of this section (vv.7-11): what do they indicate will be some of the hallmarks of a converted person?

3. **Read 3.12-16.** Peter's words are direct, personal, and focused on Jesus, the same 'This is that' message which we saw last time: what they saw before them had its explanation in Jesus alone.

Read **Isaiah 59.1-2** & **Eph.4.30**. Does personal piety have no part at all to play in the saving power of God being released (v.12)?

Peter personalized the message: check how many times he used the word "*.. you ..*" and notice how each time he drew a contrast (vv.12-15). What are the contrasts, and why do you think he did this so repeatedly?

What is meant by the "*.. faith in Jesus' name ..*" (v.16) which saw this man being raised to newness of life?

And to whose faith is reference being made – that of Peter and John, or that of the man himself? Or both?

We long to see people experiencing the converting and renewing power of God's Holy Spirit (being 'made strong' and knowing 'complete healing'). What, then, should we be learning from this pivotal verse (v.16)?

4. **Read 3.17-26.** The miracle experienced by the crippled man becomes the message expounded here by a changed man (Peter), who'd also known what it was to have been 'crippled' and raised to his feet again, albeit in a far more profound sense.

In what ways does the thrust of Peter's words in v.19 mirror the experience of the lame man?

What is encompassed by the promise of God in the gospel according to what Peter says here? (vv.19-21)

Read **Galatians 3.5-18** and compare it with what Peter said in Acts 3.24-26. What constitutes the 'blessing' of God to which both Peter and Paul referred?

Compare v.26 with what Paul wrote in **Romans 1.16**. Why was it "*.. first to you ..*" that Jesus was sent by God after being raised from the dead? And what did Paul mean by his

stressing that the gospel is ‘.. the power of God for the salvation of everyone: *first for the Jew ..*’?

5. **Read 4.1-4** These verses highlight what the rest of Acts makes clear is a consistent feature of all gospel ministry – opposition: an opposition which can often be intense and extreme.

Read **John 15.18-27**. What is it about Jesus which prompts hatred as well as love, rejection as well as faith?

And what are the reasons why two ordinary up-country fishermen could so rile the priests and Sadducees, and yet stir such faith in others?

6. **Read 4.5-12**. Here we see again (v.8) how the Holy Spirit empowers His people to ‘prophesy’, to bring God’s message to His world (remember Joel’s words quoted by Peter in Acts 2.17, 18).

Why do claims about the uniqueness of Jesus (“.. *Jesus Christ of Nazareth ..*”), the reality of the supernatural (“.. *whom God raised from the dead ..*”), and the exclusiveness of the gospel (“.. *salvation is found in no one else ..*”), occasion such antagonism in every generation?

7. **Read 4.13-22**. Gospel ministry is always under pressure to tone down the message. Over against that pressure, however, other considerations come into play.

The good news is just that: *news* – the record of things that have happened. What was the evidence here which was impossible to deny and therefore hard to suppress (vv.13f)? Are we able to point to similar ‘evidence’?

The gospel proclaims the *lordship* of Jesus: the ultimate authority. What are contemporary scenarios where obeying Him may bring us into conflict with others (vv.19f)?