

Acts 3:1-26 The Healing Power of Moral Clarity

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 October 2023

Preacher: Rev. George Sinclair

[0 : 0 0] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah. It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself? The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

Father, we ask that your Holy Spirit would bring this part of your Word to us. Bring it deep into our hearts. And Father, in the context of the gospel, bring this, your Word, into our hearts, so that your Word will rule in our hearts, that it'll form our hearts, and that we will live lives, Father, that are free, and that bring you glory. And we ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son, and our Savior. Amen. Please be seated. I don't have a lot of people that I know that are Jewish, or at least that might have more people that I know that are Jewish. I just don't know that they're Jewish, just as lots of people might know Christians and not realize that they're a Christian.

But for those that I do know are Jewish, as I've bumped into them over the last few days, I've made a point of going up to them and asking how they're doing. I ask them how their family and friends are doing, if their family and friends are safe. And then I tell them if there's anything I or my church can do to help you, just to let me know, or let your rabbi know if you have a rabbi, and we'd be glad to do what we could to help you at this time. And they've all been very appreciative. One person that I talked to this week, she's an older woman, and she uses a walker, and she's a real character. And she shared, she said, I really appreciate that. I know you're a Christian, and I really appreciate that you would say that to me. And then she said, you know, many of my friends, I guess around her own age, were very frightened. And then she burst into this big smile, and she said, but I just feel like I have to tell everybody I meet that I'm Jewish.

And I just sort of completely defy those types of fears. And she's a real character. You know, in the providence of God, as you know, it's very rare that I would sort of switch my sermon to talk about something which is quite contemporary. And I'm not doing that this week. But in the providence of God, the text that we're going to look at today is actually very relevant to what's going on right now in the world and in Canada. Because, in fact, what I can tell you is if you had brought a Jewish friend to church today, I only had Josiah read the first 10 verses. We're going to look at the first, all 26 verses in chapter 3. And if they had been sitting beside you, your Jewish friend, when they come to certain verses, you would have felt your Jewish friend stiffen.

And you would have felt them, you would just feel that all of a sudden, they went from just sort of being relaxed to being very tense. Because in fact, in this text of scripture that we're going to use, are one of the main texts that people who call themselves Christians throughout the centuries when they wanted to kill Jewish people, have used as a justification to kill Jewish people.

[4 : 29] It's in the text that we're going to look at today. And so when they hear, if we had a Jewish friend with us and they, that you hear these things, they would, you, they would just noticeably get very, very tense. And given that in Canada, we have people yelling, from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free, which is very unambiguously a call for the death of Jewish people.

And the erasing of the Jewish nation. It is exactly that.

So it's very telling. It's very providential that we will look at a text that seems to support what some Christians, or who call themselves Christians, have done throughout the centuries when they've initiated a violent, murderous tax on Jewish people.

So let's walk towards this. And we're going to look at Acts chapter 3. And actually, Acts chapter 3 and 4 are really, in a sense, one story in four parts. And today, we're just going to look at chapter 3, the first two parts.

And then next week, we'll look at the rest of the story, parts 3 and 4. And it's actually very, very ironic, or I didn't say it's ironic. It's actually very telling that this text that has been used by Christians to justify murderous actions towards Jewish people actually begins with a remarkable healing.

[6 : 16] But I'm just going to say something here. Any person who calls themselves a Christian, who hates Jewish people, doesn't know the Bible.

They are completely, I'm not exaggerating, they are completely and utterly ignorant of the Bible. But unfortunately, that has happened much in the past. Anyway, let's look at it.

So here, chapter 3, what's happened, we're reading an ancient history, eyewitness history of Jesus, I mean, sorry, not Jesus, an ancient eyewitness history, written by an eyewitness and based on eyewitness testimony of sort of the first 30-ish years of the Jesus movement.

It begins in Jerusalem, it will end in Rome. And so it is really, literally, a Jesus movement that starts to encircle the empire and ends right in the very center of the empire.

And Jesus has died and risen from the dead, and 50 days later, the Holy Spirit falls. We Christians now call it the day of Pentecost.

[7 : 26] And then, right after that happens, Peter preaches the first Christian sermon, and then we get a bit of a summary of the early church. And now we have this next story. And we don't know exactly how late it is, they don't give enough specific time markers, but probably within a couple of days or a couple of weeks, this next story happens, and here's how it goes.

Now, Peter and John, that's two of the apostles, were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour, which sort of is three-ish. So at three-ish, they went up to the temple to pray.

And a man lame from birth was being carried, sorry, I have to move my notes. A man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple, that is called the Beautiful Gate, to ask alms of those entering the temple. And asking for alms, I mean, he was asking for money, he was a beggar.

Now, just pause here for a second. This is a very important and very contemporary little image, this picture that we're getting. In the original language, it actually says something very poetic.

Like, I don't know actually why they don't just translate it more poetic. And it says at the beginning that he was lame from birth. It actually says, lame from his mother's womb.

[8 : 48] Which is actually quite beautiful. Lame from his mother's womb. And the other thing about this story is that in many ways, this is a story that couldn't happen in very many places other than Jerusalem.

And that's because the custom of the ancient world was that if they had seen a baby come out of the womb and be born, and there's obviously something massively deformed about his ankle and his feet.

And they would look at it and they would know that there's just something massively deformed about his feet and his ankle. He's never going to be able to walk. In the pagan world, they would have taken that baby and they would have taken him to a wilderness area and left him there to die.

But what we call our Old Testament and our Jewish friends call it the Tanakh forbids that. And so the Jewish parents would have kept the baby and loved the baby. And of course, it would have been a great strain on them.

He would not be able to work. So he goes to his regular place to beg. For those of us who are downtown a fair bit and have regular patterns, one of the things you'll often notice is that there's regulars.

[9 : 53] Like, you know, like you go to that certain spot and you know that there's going to be the same one or two or three different people who beg at that corner all the time. They're regulars. I make it a point of trying to befriend the regulars, at least give them the dignity of treating them like a human being.

And occasionally buying them coffee or maybe a piece of pizza or something like that. But so this fellow, who's nameless, has been not ever able to walk and he's a regular at the temple.

It's going to become more and more clear. And by the way, we're going to discover in the second half of the story in chapter four that he's over 40. So he's been lame for a long time.

He's over 40. So verse three, what happens? So Peter and John about to go into the temple, sorry, seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, the beggar asked to receive some money.

And Peter directed his gaze at the man as did John and he said, look at us. Now this guy, he's probably all getting hopeful. Like maybe this is going to be like a lot of money.

[11 : 00] Look at us. And so the beggar fixed his attention on them, verse five, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, I have no silver and gold.

And his heart would have, oh, I have no silver or gold. I'm not going to get a lot of money. But Peter continues, but what I do have, I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.

And Peter takes the man by the right hand and starts to help him up. And immediately the man's feet and ankles were made strong.

And leaping up, he stood and began to walk and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. Now, actually, we'll keep going for the next few verses.

And all the people saw him walking and praising God and recognized him as the one who sat at the beautiful gate of the temple asking for alms. And they were all filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to the man.

[12 : 13] Now, it's not a surprise that many people, not only in our modern world, but especially over the last 150 or 180 years, one of the reasons they would say that what I'm reading isn't an ancient eyewitness history is they would say it can't be an ancient eyewitness history because we know that things like this don't happen, that science and medicine have proven that things like this don't happen.

And so, therefore, what you're seeing is a little bit of like Aesop's fables or stories about the great pumpkin or Santa Claus or the Easter bunny. It's some type of a metaphor or a nice story to try to inspire some types of thoughts amongst you.

Now, I just want to mention it very briefly and I'm going to probably, you've heard me talk about this more in some of my earlier sermons and I'll probably come back to it in a later sermon, but just a couple of things about this.

The first thing is everything about this book shows that they're trying, that they believe they're writing history. There's nothing in it, there's nothing in the original language, everything about it, all of the historical tie-ins that you'll see.

Like, as we go through the book of Acts, scholars will be able to say, we know that this happened in the year 49, we know that this happened in the year 51 because the book has so many constant references to things known in the ancient world and so it's, and there's been other studies to show that even things like the titles that they get for the Roman officials and the use of names, that everything about it points that this was an historical book written, they're claiming that this actually happened.

[13 : 52] I mean, that's the bottom line. They're not claiming that this is metaphor or poetry or just a fable. They're claiming this actually all really happened. And the second thing is, and this is where I don't have time to go into it, but in fact, science and medicine by its very nature can't disprove that this happened.

Science can say that there's no science, they can't come up with a scientific reason for it happening, but as it's going to be very obvious, Peter's not claiming that there's a scientific reason for it happening.

He's claiming it's a miracle. And science, by its very nature, can never disprove miracles. In fact, the only thing that science and medicine can do is increase the wow.

So now, you know, probably the only thing they could see because of the clothes he would have been wearing is his ankles and his feet. But the wow is that we now know that if you'd lifted him up, that you would have seen from his buttocks down that he had next to no muscle and we would know that because he's never been able to walk, he had next to no bone density and his tendons and his ligaments would have been basically atrophied and he would have no muscle memory or knowledge about how to walk.

So we would look at that and say, that's a wow. Like, God didn't just sort of fix his ankles and his feet. He built muscle and tendon and ligament and bone and muscle memory and all of that so that he could go from doing this.

[15 : 23] Like, that just increases the wow. I'm not saying it proves that the miracle happened, but I'm just saying that's what the very claim of the book is that it happened. And by the way, all of this is very downstream.

One of the reasons I believe in miracles is because I believe the historical evidence is very good that Jesus really rose from the dead. And if Jesus really rose from the dead, then there's miracles.

Like, that's not impossible to believe that God would do miracles. And then the third thing is that actually what the skeptic doesn't understand is on one level he is correct.

There is a profound metaphor here that's going to be developed throughout the epistles and throughout the book of Acts. And the profound metaphor is that one of the ways to understand what salvation is, when Jesus saves you, when he makes you right with God, one of the ways to understand that is this shows you that it's a healing.

Salvation is to be healed by God. He heals your relationship with himself. Part of the reason, not part of the reason, the reason we die is that because our soul has been in rebellion against God, then our soul, in a sense, is not properly attached to our body and our body withers and then dies and our soul and our bodies go their separate ways and the body dies.

[16 : 41] And so what salvation is is a profound healing of who you are, a healing that goes on into eternity. So there is, in fact, a very profound metaphor there, but there's no metaphor unless it happened.

I can't say to you, give your life to Christ and you will begin to experience a profound healing that goes into all of eternity if Jesus didn't actually rise from the dead and if miracles like this don't happen, then there's no metaphor whatsoever.

There's just foolishness. But you might say, well, okay, George, that's all very, very interesting, but I don't see anything about this which is anti-Semitic.

Well, that comes next because what's going to happen next is Peter explains what's just happened and its significance. So let's look at how he explains it. It begins at verse 11.

Well, the man clung to Peter and John and all the people utterly astounded ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's and when Peter saw it, he sees it, there's a crowd, he addressed the people.

[17 : 42] Now, note what he does. The very first thing he does is very important and it fits with as well that there's a claim of a miracle. He says, Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this or why do you stare at us as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk?

So very clearly, right up front, he says, listen, it has nothing to do with how holy we are, it has nothing to do with anything we've done. We haven't discussed, it's not like they've gone back in a time machine, you know, from up in the future and they have some ray that can heal.

No, no, it has nothing to do with us. That's the very first thing they claim. Well, what does? Well, here's how he begins to explain the meaning and the significance of what's just happened.

Verse 13, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant, Jesus, uh-oh, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate when Pilate had decided to release him.

But you denied the holy and righteous one and asked for a murderer to be granted to you and you killed the author of life whom God raised from the dead.

[18 : 58] To this we are witnesses. And your Jewish friend stiffens. The cry of people claiming to be Christians who wanted to murder Jews throughout the centuries is said, you killed Jesus.

You killed Jesus. Jesus. And maybe if your Jewish friend is with you this morning and they're shocked at what I just read and they'd be even more shocked and said, good grief, they get it from the Bible.

Like they can't just say this is some other type of cultural thing that's come up or some later church teaching. Like they get it right from the Bible. It's written in the Bible. You killed. You killed Jesus.

From the river to the sea Palestine will be free.

You killed Jesus. Now let's also be clear it's actually very hard for us in our cultural moment to understand what's going on in the text.

[20 : 16] There's a significant part of what's going on in our culture right now that in fact would make it obvious that the right way to read this text is that when I spoke to the elderly woman this week who is Jewish that rather than comforting her and telling her of my support and my willingness to help her in any way I could there's a basic way of understanding moral world and relations between peoples today which would say that in fact the obvious thing for me to say to her is not I'll help you and support you but you killed Jesus what do I mean see one of the things is in this the way it's been used by anti-Semites throughout the years is that literally when I meet that elderly Jewish woman or I meet another one of my Jewish friends that it really is as if they killed Jesus I mean even though they've lived 2,000 years after there's no possible way they could be responsible for killing

Jesus but they're Jewish and that's part of what it means to be Jewish that they have that stain upon them that can never in a sense be removed you see we live in a cultural moment and whether it's the bureaucracy the courts public schools universities the media we live in an age which increasingly thinks in terms of group responsibilities some of you here have immigrated to the country in the last very short period of time but if you are white it's as if you are responsible for what happened to the native people 200 years ago and it goes on with other people groups that's the way we're taught to think that's the way we're taught to understand moral issues it's directly analogous to anti-Semitism

I mean the motivation behind it is to seek justice and all of that and I'm not denying that there's often very good motivations for thinking in those categories but increasingly in our culture that's how we're taught to think and so if you've been taught to think in terms of racial categories and other types of categories whether it be categories connected to gender or sexuality or religion or ableism or anything like that if you're taught to think in categories and you see a thing like that then all of a sudden it makes sense that that's how Christians would maybe understand the issue and it gets all complicated because the whole thing ends up getting very complicated with who's up and who's down and how you parse it and how you manage it but in some ways increasingly in our culture it makes it the natural way to read this text part of the problem with this way of thinking is that there's no hope there's no hope the more we think in categories so that it would be just as if

I was to say to every English person that I met that you're directly responsible for the killing of my ancestors in Ireland during the potato famine if an Australian we have an Australian in our congregation he was to meet an English person he could say you're directly responsible for sending my forebearers to Australia well there's nowhere to go with that there's only unending recrimination and guilt and this is not what the Bible is saying here by the way actually what you see here is the ground work and the framework for moral clarity and hope profound hope when I said earlier that anybody who is anti-Semitic is ignorant of the Bible you'll see in a moment why because if they were just to read not only the mere fact that this is explaining the healing should make them wonder whether this is in fact the right way to read the text and the next few verses will definitely bring it in but here's the thing about the text what

Peter is doing here is actually a moment of very courageous moral clarity the part which we're going to look at next week is that after this speech Peter is arrested for what he says he's arrested for what he says because and what if you go back and you read the rest of the book of Acts and if you read the other epistles all of which take place after the book of Acts what you'll see is they never say this again why do they never say it again because the Bible teaches that you are responsible for your own moral actions there's some nuances here obviously which if I was doing a sermon just on that I would talk a little bit about some of the nuances but fundamentally the Bible has the message that Josiah is responsible for Josiah's sins he is great grandfathers Josiah is responsible for his own sin George is responsible for his own sin Diane is responsible for her own sin and she is not responsible for the sins of her forebears she's just not responsible for them that's the biblical message and so

[26 : 13] Peter says this why does Peter say this because he's literally standing in front of people who actually did do this and that takes great courage you're a tiny little we all know how much courage it takes if you're you know you go to you know those you go to workplace things to express views and all that type of thing and share and you know that if you're the one person who disagrees with everybody in the room you can't say what you actually think it takes a very weird type of person who can do that somebody who's sort of socially awkward who can actually be the one person in the room to say against what everybody else is saying you know God love them you know God raises up socially awkward people I used to have a guy in the congregation and if he's listening to this this is a positive thing about it he was that guy who could go to a secular university and speak to like a thousand people 950 of them all let's say completely and utterly in favor of these you know of abortion and all of that type of thing and he would be the guy who'd stand up and tell them they're all wrong he's that type of odd guy now by the way he's an odd guy

I discovered like you don't want him on your committee why because he just he doesn't pick up social cues but he was used powerfully by God right so this is Peter says that to them but you go on and you read the rest of the book of Acts and when Peter's talking to Jewish people in you know Berea or Thessalonica or Corinth he doesn't say you killed the Jews because they didn't he doesn't say that to them you go back in the epistles and they talk about Jerusalem they don't say you killed no they don't because they didn't do it and so you see here that in fact you begin to see how beautiful this text is and how much our culture needs it because we need moral clarity as human beings we fundamentally need moral clarity and if you think in group categories you will never come to moral clarity you will only be lost in a fog of moral confusion and so here first of all we see that

Peter has moral clarity has great courage he says this to them but the next parts are even more important because here's the thing you can never have moral clarity without hope there can be no moral clarity without hope without hope of forgiveness of reconciliation if you don't have that hope you're never going to have moral clarity you just have defending your position and pushing back oh yeah you say I did that well you did this that's what happens it doesn't create any type of peace without hope and that's what the rest of the text shows so beautifully begin with verse 16 and his name by faith in his name has made this man strong whom you see and know and the faith that is through Jesus has given this man the perfect health in the presence of you all and as I said in a sense health as we'll see if you go back and read the epistles and if you go back and read the gospels health is often an image that Jesus uses of salvation but here's where the hope comes in verse 17 and following and now brothers

I know that you acted in ignorance as did also your rulers now just pause the Bible here is making a biblical distinction it does acknowledge that sometimes you are ignorant of a wrong thing you've done and in a sense it lessens the punishment but it never erases responsibility it never erases responsibility so he acknowledges that they obviously didn't literally think I mean when they call him the holy and righteous one those are means they're saying he's God author of life that's God right and then verse 18 we see this here but what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets that as Christ would suffer he thus fulfilled he's partially saying you should have actually been aware of this because it's so clearly seen in the scriptures but here's the hope repent just pause here for a second before we go any further see in our day and age we'd say you've done that you're responsible for it that guilt is with you forever you will always be tarnished and stained by it it will always be with you and if

I'm the person on the other end of that because of my sexuality or my age or my ethnicity like what can I do with that and if Peter are going to say repent you just need to spend the rest of your life feeling terrible about what's happened and accepting responsibility for it and making reparations about it and accepting when you get punished for the wrong things that were done by your forebears and that's how the modern world speaks but listen again what he says here in verse 19 repent and turn back that your sins may be blotted out in the ancient world the ink that they used had no acid in it so it just rested on the top of what they were writing on and it meant that if you wanted to erase it you just needed a damp cloth and it would completely remove what was written and that that's the image all of the things all the accusations against you all of the things that you've done wrong the true ones repent verse 19 and turn back that your sins may be blotted out and further the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord and then thirdly that he may send the Christ appointed for you

[32 : 29] Jesus whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago these are the people who killed Jesus and Peter has been taught by Jesus and Peter knows something about the need for forgiveness because Peter knows that he denied Jesus too and that he really should have known better because Jesus even warned him he was going to do this and Peter in his pride denied that he was going to deny Jesus but Peter denied Jesus he knows something about what is needed and he knows that in shame and embarrassment and in lacking of courage he hid while Jesus was being crucified he went and hid when Jesus was being crucified he was not brave there is nothing noble about him he knows how desperately he needs forgiveness and he's speaking to the people who actually have killed

Jesus and he's been taught by Jesus and he says you know what Jesus heart is for you like why did Jesus die not that you will feel crappy and guilty for the rest of your life and feel as if there is a stain and a shame on you that you can never get away from that you will suffer for for the rest of your life and no matter what you'd suffer you deserve to suffer that no he says repent the things you've done wrong will be completely and utterly removed from your record God will send refreshment to you reference to the Holy Spirit what a wonderful way to understand the coming of the Holy Spirit a refreshment that comes to you and then Jesus himself will come to you he will be with you he is for you you will be in him he will be in you he will walk with you now I have hope now I have hope when I have hope

I can begin to have moral clarity I mean moral clarity is always hard because we're selfish selfish and have envy and all that stuff and I'm not denying it we can begin to have hope we can look at our lives and we can accept the wrong that we've done and maybe look at the wrong we've done and ask God to give us wisdom about the wrong we've done and there's hope there's hope to look there's hope to grow there's hope to forgive there's hope to maybe be reconciled there's hope that even if we're not reconciled that we know that God has forgiven us and that we can move forward with life it's going to tell you a little bit later on that another 2,000 people become Christians because you see one of the deepest needs that a human being has is to know that they've been forgiven by their creator the true and living God and forgiveness is a type of deep healing forgiveness is a type of deep healing nobody could read this text and think it justifies hurting any

Jewish person that we know invite you to stand I know that Owen's going to get up and he's going to lead us in some intercessions I want to do two prayers for us at this time last week I prayed about the terrible situation in Israel in many ways in every way it's only gotten worse we've seen more and more people in our streets of our cities and our country urging the death of our Jewish neighbors and the nation of Israel and I prayed about it and I prayed alright but it's hard to pray without sounding like you have moral compromise or both side and so

I wrote a prayer because I wanted to try to get it as close to right as I could and I'm not saying this is perfect it's not the scripture but I'm going to pray first about the situation that's going on in our culture and then I'm going to pray for us in light of this sermon and by the way if you can ask me how you can let me know it would be very funny if I said give me some feedback and I got really defensive after the sermon I just talked about how knowing you're repentant allows you to move towards moral clarity I would be very hypocritical of me but let me know how it is and I might have it as part of our prayers of the people over the coming weeks so I'm going to pray this prayer first and then I'll pray more directly in light of the sermon let us pray almighty god we pray for the defeat and the end of hamas please comfort and protect our jewish neighbors grant our political leaders moral clarity and courage please bring to repentance all in our community who are calling for the end of israel and the death of jewish people we pray for great unity and boldness for your church in israel especially for palestinian and jewish christians and we ask this in jesus name amen father um we we are so grateful for your word for its wisdom and its power and we are so grateful father for jesus that when he looks at us when you looked at us you didn't weigh our merits you pardon our offenses we give you thanks and praise that when we accept christ as savior and lord that this is the the first step of a great and eternal healing that that jesus brings to us that our sins are washed away that the holy spirit comes to us to refresh us and that christ himself will walk with us we ask lord that you help the gospel to become more and more real to our hearts that we might know that we are forgiven and that your forgiveness is completely and utterly rock solid assured so that we might have the courage to look at the things in our own life that we have done that are wrong the things that we should have done that we didn't the things that we did do that we shouldn't have that you would grant us father security in christ to look at it honestly that we might amend our lives that we might make amendment where we have to make amendment where we might apologize where we have to apologize that we might call out for you to live in a way which honors people and brings glory to you and is good for us and we ask these things in the name of jesus your son and our savior amen but ask them for this we that we are uh we how can help