

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

God's Ways, 101

(Acts 3:1--4:4)

Study #4

Introduction: Favorite passages...

The passage in front of us this morning has held a soft spot in my heart for about thirty years. I began to think of this passage in a new way when I was seminary student at Dallas Theological Seminary.

During my first year I took a course every first year student takes - Bible Study Methods - with a legendary professor, Dr. Howard Hendricks.

It was a fantastic class. Every Tuesday and Thursday Hendricks infected us with his contagious passion for the Bible. The last class session of that course was a special treat for the whole student body at the seminary, because the students of that class (first year students) were assigned to present a Bible passage in some creative format.

On that day, in addition to the sixty or so students enrolled in Bible Study Methods, another hundred or so upper classmen came to class to see how the first year guys did with their creative presentations.

I decided that for my creative presentation I would go out on a limb, write a song, and play it. See, I became a Christian in the 1970's, so I played the guitar (albeit quite badly). I took my guitar to seminary with me that day, and when it came time for my presentation, I grabbed the guitar and walked down the stairs to the front of the classroom, and began to sing the song I had written.

All went well for about a bit. Then, midway through the second verse, I froze. I forgot the words to the song I MYSELF HAD WRITTEN!! Completely befuddled, I looked in horror at my classmates - who were horrified for me.

As far as I could tell, Dr. Hendricks was not horrified. But, then, he was certainly not impressed, either.

I ended the song with a thud and limped back to my seat. I was humiliated. I had humiliated myself. Up to that point in my life, I had known several instances of embarrassment. This one took the cake.

At the end of that class period, the upperclassmen were shaking their heads in disbelief at what I had done. You just didn't do such a thing in Hendrick's class. Nobody was thinking, "*Man, I'll bet that guy goes far in the pastorate. Real man of genius there. Impactful. Church planter? You bet!*"

As I tell that story to you now I can still feel the emotions of that day. It was a bad day.

Maybe you can think back to a time when your "weakness" was on display for all to see. You know how it feels. If your experience was like mine was, your display of weakness wasn't all that enjoyable.

But I don't tell you that story, after pastoring for a while, to say anything like, "*I showed them. I proved those guys wrong!*"

I tell the story to highlight a truth that we see throughout the Bible about the ways of God. I'm calling it today, The Ways of God, 101. It is that basic. And that truth is this:

It is God's normal method to work through human weakness. He prefers to work through weaklings, misfits, cracked pots, and failures because those kinds of people display His strength most powerfully.¹

There is no question but that this most basic of the ways of God is on brilliant display in Acts, chapter 3.

¹ We might even say that when God uses people who are strong, He does so in spite of their strength, not because of it.

Back in Acts 2, we read, “*many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.*” Chapter three of Acts brings us one of those “*wonders.*”²

We are not told how long after Pentecost the event recorded in chapter three occurred. Probably not much time at all. My guess is something like a few days, or at the most two to three weeks.

The apostles Peter and John are on their way to the temple in Jerusalem to pray together.

Healing at the Temple (3:1-10)

Apostles on the Way to the Temple (v.1)

[3:1] Now Peter and John were going up³ to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer.

The Jewishness of early Christianity

This scene highlights the Jewishness of early Christianity. It can be easy for us to forget that at this early point all of the Christians in the world were Jews.

It will still be some time before the first non-Jew comes to faith in Jesus, and so, the initial form that Christianity took was very Jewish.

In the first century, twice during each day, devout Jews would retreat to prayer. One of the times for prayer time was in the middle of the morning; the other was in the middle of the afternoon.

This is the afternoon prayer time, “the ninth hour” being the ninth hour from sunrise.

² We certainly don’t have a complete record of all the healings and miracles of the early church.

³ The temple was at an elevated location in Jerusalem. Temple Mount. Hence, going “up” to pray.

Peter and John are continuing with the customs they had followed all their lives as God-fearing Jews. Only now they are worshiping at the Jewish temple as believers in Jesus.

The prayerfulness of early Christianity

Acts 2 told us that, among other things, the disciples of Jesus were “*continually devoting themselves to...prayer.*” Here, Peter and John, two of the leading apostles were demonstrating that priority for prayer.

They prayed at the drop of a hat. They prayed as second nature. They prayed instinctively. Jesus modeled a life of prayer and taught them to pray. So, praying - talking to God, and talking to God together - was as natural for them as talking to each other.

Transition: The power of convergence...

What happened as they approached the temple is a perfect example of *convergence*. Convergence is an important phenomenon in the world. Much of what happens to any of us depends on convergence.

If fish and a fisherman show up at the same time and place, if they *converge*, there is fish for dinner. If you hit the lights on Bandera Road just right, you and the green lights will *converge* from 410 to 1604 - well, that would be known as a *miraculous convergence*.

Convergence comes into play in Acts 3, because at precisely the same time that Peter and John were arriving at the Temple to worship, another man (he is never named) was arriving at the temple.

He was not coming to the temple to worship, but to beg.

A Lame Man Begging at the Temple (vv. 2-3)

The disabled in ancient societies

The man with whom Peter and John converged was lame. Every day, perhaps at the hours of prayer, friends or family would carry him to the steps leading up to the temple to beg.

In the ancient world it was not unusual to see beggars sitting or lying near the entrances to temples or shrines. They knew that worshippers often brought money or goods as part of their worship.

With money in their wallets and in a “religious” mood, the worshippers were easily prevailed upon for donations.

Look through the Gospels and you’ll see that Jesus frequently dealt with people who were lame or who were otherwise physically disabled throughout His life. He always treated them with the utmost respect and dignity and compassion. He loved them and breathed hope into their lives.

His followers had watched Him and they learned well. Peter and John knew how precious people are in God’s sight who have disabilities. It was with these eyes that they would have seen this man.

This man’s life

[3:2] And a man who had been lame from his mother’s womb was being carried along whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple.

This man’s disability could have been anything - blindness, leprosy, epilepsy, stroke victim, cerebral palsy, mental retardation. He happened to be lame.

The Bible tells us that he was lame. But he hadn’t broken a leg. His infirmity wasn’t due to a childhood disease. He had been lame all his life, from the womb.⁴

He had never walked. Just think about that. For whatever reason - ill-formed bone structure in the legs or feet; nerve endings never connected - he had never been a toddler. No running outside as a child, no working as an adult.

Even in the first century there were jobs, desk jobs, a lame man could have done. Evidently his family had not been able to help him learn the skills necessary to take those jobs. The only way for him to possibly support himself was by begging.

So, every day, he was carried to the temple to do the one thing he could do. All day long he held out his hand, totally dependent on the kindness of strangers.

The scene we see

There is no agreement on the exact location of what Luke calls here, “The Beautiful Gate.” In fact, no other reference can be found to the Beautiful Gate in the whole Bible.

It was likely a gateway that led into the Court of the Women, a court large enough to hold the crowd that would gather shortly.

It was at this gate that the lame beggar was being placed. He was still on his way to the place where he would spend several hours begging. And his arrival *converged* with Peter’s and John’s arrival at the Beautiful Gate.

The man noticed Peter and John and held out his hand.

[3:3] When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he began asking to receive alms.

What will Peter and John do? Surely, these men who have walked with Jesus will be compassionate and loving. Surely, they will share what they have with this man.

Well, they do something surprising. Rather than reach into their pockets for money, they speak to the man.

Apostles, Lame Man Connect (vv. 4-5)

Peter commanded, “Look at us!” (v. 4)

[3:4] But Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze on him and said, “Look at us!”

⁴ John’s Gospel tells of Jesus encounter with a man who was born blind. Perhaps Peter had the confidence that God could heal even a man born lame by watching as Jesus healed a man who had never seen.

That, in and of itself, is impressive. To speak to someone is to humanize them. To make eye contact personalizes everything. Peter and John didn't turn their eyes away from the man. They didn't ignore him. They didn't rush past.

No - they looked right at him, spoke, and invited the man into their world. In a voice filled with kindness and compassion and urgency, Peter said, "**Look at us.**"

So, quick - what's going through the lame man's mind? Is he used to being spoken to? Do most people passing by talk with him? Don't most people give him a coin and then move on - no personal contact? Is he regularly humanized? What impact does the command - "**Look at us!**" - have on him?

Well, he certainly saw it as a good sign!

The lame man looked (v. 5)

[3:5] And he began to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them.

Clearly, he's expecting to receive money. Anytime anybody wants his attention it is to give him some loose change. Maybe, given the verbal greeting, the man is hopeful that he'll get a larger than normal gift from these two men?

Can you sense the man's disappointment when he hears the first words out of Peter's mouth?

A Miraculous Healing! (vv. 6-8)

What Peter can't give (v. 6)

[3:6] But Peter said, "I do not possess silver and gold"⁵

⁵ The church of Jesus Christ can no longer say, "Silver and gold have I none." And neither can she say, "Rise and walk!" (Conversation between a boasting Pope Innocent II, who was displaying the wealth of the Vatican, and Thomas Aquinas, who was decrying the church's spiritual impotence).

Isn't that fascinating? It's a very surprising start to Peter's address. The apostles Peter and John have no money.

I don't think he was saying that he didn't have any pocket change on him. I think Peter was saying that he and John were poor. They were fishermen who hadn't plied their trade for at least three years and had been traipsing around with Jesus. Now they are a part of a community that will support them through voluntary benevolence. Peter spoke truly - they have no money, all right.

And imagine that - the chief apostles of Jesus Christ have no money. If there was ever a clear message that serving Jesus doesn't guarantee financial riches, this is it!

But, back to the scene at hand.

If they have no money, they won't be able to do much for the lame man, right? Well, having established his financial position, Peter gave the crippled man what could not have been purchased with any amount of money.

Peter gives the man what he has (v. 7)

[3:6]... "I do not possess silver and gold but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—walk!" [3:7] And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened.

The lame man's right hand was probably already extended in expectation of receiving money. But instead of receiving something from Peter's hand, he received Peter's hand. The big, burly fisherman's hand grasped his own - and then Peter pulled the man to a place he had never been before - his own two feet!

Instantly, miraculously, in the time it took to rise, he was healed. And what follows is jam-packed with significance.

Miraculously healed!! (v. 8)

[3:8] With a leap he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

There is, first, a miracle of healing. The parts of this man's body that were broken were fixed by the power of God. And even after a lifetime's worth of non-use there was no muscular atrophy. The muscles were instantly strong enough to allow him to move with reckless abandon.

There is also the miracle of walking and leaping! It was miraculous that this guy, who, as Luke tells us, had been lame from birth, received not only a healthy body, but the ability to walk. He by-passed toddler hood altogether! There is instant coordination. Instant agility. Instant strength and energy.

And there is, finally, the wonder of what has happened in this man's soul. He is praising God and he is moving toward the temple. He's worshipping God for all he's worth. He has just been given a new lease on life, an extreme personal makeover, and he knows that Jesus is the one who is responsible for it!

This is the genuine article - an honest-to-God, Class A, Red Sea parting type miracle!

And the miracle was performed in a public place, by a direct word in the name of Christ without prayer, without the laying on of hands, without anointing with oil.

The healing was instantaneous, complete and permanent. And it left behind a huge wake.

Impressions (vv. 9-10)

[3:9] And all the people saw him walking and praising God [10] and they were taking note of him as being the one who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate of the temple to beg alms, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Here is the pattern of New Testament evangelism. We've already seen it in Acts. We'll see it again.

- First, God works, often showcasing His strength in the face of human weakness, amazing by-standers with His power and goodness. (This certainly happened here!)

- Second, God's people proclaim the Gospel. (This is just about to happen here!)

Everybody recognized this guy who was now bouncing around in front of them as the pitiful man who had spent so many years begging.

Everyone knew that his lameness had not been a fraud. And there was no way to fake his running and jumping.

Word quickly got out about what had happened. And a crowd gathered at a place called "the portico of Solomon."

[3:11] While he was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement.

This miracle, like the miracles that occurred on the Day of Pentecost, was an attention grabber.

Peter, watching the crowds swell, saw another golden opportunity to proclaim Jesus - and he took it. He saw an open door at the Beautiful Gate and he walked right through it.

A Message Follows the Healing (3:12-26)

This Miracle Brought to You by FAITH IN JESUS (vv. 12-16)

The miracle - not a work of man (v. 12)

The people, having been wowed by the miracle, were in a listening mood and were ready to listen to anything Peter might have to say. So with the formerly lame man physically clinging to Peter and John, Peter spoke!

[3:12] But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk?"

He directs all attention away from himself and John. "Hey, it's not about us! This is a God thing."

And thus launched, Peter's speaks clearly, boldly, courageously.

The miracle is God's doing! (v. 13)

[3:13] “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob⁶, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. [3:14] But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, [15] but put to death the Prince of life⁷, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. [3:16] And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all.”

He accused his audience of putting Jesus, the Prince of LIFE, to death! He reminded them that they had asked that the murderer, Barabbas, be released instead of the innocent Jesus. “Remember, guys, how Pilate was willing to let Jesus go, but you demanded His death. ‘Crucify Him!’ you said.”

But then, says Peter, God raised Him from the dead - and notice that nobody jumped up to contradict Peter when he said this (everybody knew that Jesus had been raised from the dead).

He makes perfectly clear that the reason the *lame* man is now the *leaping* man is because of faith in this risen and ascended Jesus.

I personally believe that Peter is talking about his own faith AND the faith of the man who was healed. Peter certainly believed that Jesus, the Son of God, could empower him to perform this miracle.

But the lame man also demonstrated faith when he looked at Peter. He clearly was praising God and knew that “Jesus” was the Name Peter had invoked to effect the healing. (Remember what Jesus said. Faith need not be very impressive to be valid. Just a mustard seed’s worth’ll do it...).

⁶ This name for God emerges on especially solemn occasions (1 Kings 18:36; 1 Chron. 29:18), as it underscores the covenant faithfulness of God.

⁷ Many mental health professionals tell us how damaging it is to arouse a sense of shame and guilt for things we have done. But, Peter’s words were not aimed at causing guilty feelings, but bringing to light true guilt.

So, it was a faith-based miracle all the way around! Even with all of that, though, the focus is not on the faith of the apostles or the beggar, but on the power of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the One who has strengthened this man so that he can now walk. And he, the lame man, was the key that God used to open the door for Peter to speak the word!

Peter continued his message. The crowd allowed him to keep speaking. No interruptions at all.

Now - YOU! - Put your Faith in Jesus (vv. 17-26)

[3:17] “And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. [3:18] “But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. [3:19] “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord [3:20] and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, [21] whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time. [3:22] “Moses said, ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to Him you shall give heed to everything He says to you. [3:23] ‘And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’ [3:24] “And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days. [3:25] “It is you who are the sons of the prophets⁸ and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’⁹ [3:26] “For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.”¹⁰

⁸ Peter addresses his audience as the descendants of the prophets they were and the beneficiaries of the Abrahamic Covenant they were, encouraging them to take the prophets’ warnings seriously.

⁹ Even the reference to worldwide blessing came true, as the unfolding of the book of Acts demonstrates.

¹⁰ Notice that nowhere in this sermon is there any reference to baptism as a condition of salvation.

They listened as he said that they hadn't really even known what they were doing when they put Jesus to death.¹¹

They listened as he told them that all of this that has happened had been predicted long ago by the prophets.

They listened as he urged them to repent of their wrong-headed thinking about Jesus and to return to God to receive forgiveness¹² and times of refreshing. *"You will be preparing the way for Jesus to come again when you turn to Him."*

And they continued listening as Peter told them that Jesus was a prophet like Moses in whom they were to trust wholeheartedly.

Now the end of a sermon is a great time to bring an exhortation. It's a time to apply something, urge to action, call to faith. But Peter never got to that point in this message.

That's because, while his audience was attentive and receptive, there were some who were furious about the message he was bringing. Their interruption of Peter's presentation brought the message to a screeching halt.

The interrupters were a crowd of religious and political dignitaries who had come with soldiers to arrest Peter!

¹¹ This comment reminds us of Jesus' words from the cross - ***"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing"*** The people's sin on Good Friday was a sin of ignorance. But now, in light of the information they are receiving from Peter, it will be "high-handed sin" if they do not repent, a sin for which there is no sacrifice.

¹² Peter used a graphic image to describe forgiveness. He said that when his hearers ***"repented and returned,"*** God would ***"wipe away"*** their sins. In ancient times, people wrote on papyrus, not on paper as we know it today. And they didn't write with ink, as we do today, which has an acid in it and which "bites" into the paper. Ancient "ink" simply lay on top of the papyrus. Erasing writing on papyrus, thus, was a simple matter of taking a wet sponge and wiping away the writing. (see Colossians 2:14). Peter promised his audience that as soon as they ***"repented and returned"*** (trusted in Christ), God would wipe away the guilt of their sins like ink off papyrus.

Fallout from the Message (4:1-4)

Opposition/Persecution (4:1-3)

Some VERY upset rulers! (vv. 1-2)

[4:1] As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, [2] being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.

The group was led by the commander of the Temple guard, an official who ranked next to the High Priest in the religious hierarchy of the day.

But the chief instigators of the interruption were the Sadducee.

The Sadducees didn't believe in angels or demons or the after-life.¹³ They believed that the messianic age had been ushered in during the days of Judas Maccabeus - so they weren't even looking for a Messiah!¹⁴

They were the aristocrats of Israel. They were drawn to politics. And since Israel didn't have a Jewish king, they kowtowed to Rome.

While Jesus had been alive, they correctly saw that He was eroding their power base. If allowed to live, His presence would have led to a very unstable situation. So, they successfully led in the effort to do away with Jesus. (The Sadducees were well represented on the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Israel which had tried Jesus only a few weeks earlier.)

Now they see the danger of Peter's preaching (to say nothing of the miracle!) doing the same thing.

¹³ They had been really upset when Lazarus was raised from the dead. In fact, that event had triggered their opposition to Jesus.

¹⁴ By contrast, the Pharisees were more popular with the people, and included Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and the Rabbi, Gamaliel. They were decidedly anti-Roman, were looking for the Messiah, were non-political, and believed in both the supernatural, generally, and in life after death.

The Sadducees, who were in Caesar's hip pocket, wanted their fellow Jews to submit to the Lordship of Caesar, so any preaching that might draw the people away from allegiance to Rome had to be stopped!

So they did what they could to stop Peter and John.

Overnight in jail (v. 3)

[4:3] And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening.

The arrival of the commander of the Temple guard heralded a sure arrest, and since it was too late in the day to convene the Sanhedrin, Peter and John (and perhaps the former lame man?) were hauled off to jail to cool their heels for the night.

Fascinating. Do you realize what has just happened? Peter and John were proclaiming the Gospel.

They were witnessing - and they got thrown in jail? They were doing the right thing, the God-honoring thing. And God just stood by and watched as His servants were hauled off to jail. He didn't rescue them.

Does this fit with what we suppose SHOULD happen when we obey God? Not that any of us would actually come right out and say, "*If you obey God, live a godly life, live for Jesus, you will live on easy street.*"

We know our Bibles too well to say that.

We have read Paul's words, **[2 Timothy 3:12]...all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.**

But are those the words that we keep posted on our refrigerators at home?

I wonder what was going through Peter's mind and John's mind as they lay in jail that long night? Did they believe that God had somehow let them down? Did they ask God why He had allowed this to happen to them?

Or did they remember Jesus' promise, **[John 16:33] "In the world you will have tribulation."**?

Now, while we are pondering those questions, look at what is recorded immediately after the detail that Peter and John were placed in jail. Luke doesn't linger there. He directs our attention elsewhere. He puts the suffering of the apostles, sad as it was, in **context**.

Salvation!!! (4:4)

[4:4] But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.¹⁵

The Sadducees discovered, as many have through the centuries, that apostles can be arrested, but you can't confine the power of the Gospel!

Even though Peter never got to deliver a proper application and altar call, thousands more people were saved.¹⁶

Eternal destinies were changed forever. People were coming to know the Lord and more souls are being added to the church.

¹⁵ It is impossible to know how many believers made up the church as of verse 4. People were being added day by day, and we don't know how many women and children believed in addition to the 5,000 men. Certainly there were many multiple thousands of believers by Acts 4:4.

¹⁶ And please note: People were not won to faith in Christ by the miracle, but by the proclamation, the crowd for which was drawn by the miracle. In fact, one of the most remarkable features of both of Peter's sermons was their Christ-centeredness. He didn't focus on the miracles that had just been performed.

Conclusion:

So, the Gospel moves forward. Thousands more are saved through faith in Jesus.

And what has God used to grab people's attention to prompt them to listen to the message? He empowered Peter to heal a man.

How many of us would have looked at the lame man on the temple steps near the Beautiful Gate and said to ourselves, "*If God is going to accomplish something of note in this city, He'll use that guy.*"?

Probably not many of us would have thought that. It would be as ludicrous as someone saying, after my fiasco at Dallas Seminary, "*God can use Dave Smith.*" Ridiculous. Ain't gonna happen. Loser.

Now I'm not saying that God has used me in any really big way. I am saying that if He has used me at all it is because I'm no big deal.

I suspect that if we tried, we could come up with a formula that stated the pretty obvious biblical truth that God works His powerful miracles in inverse proportion to the strength of the person He's using.

- He chose to use the teenaged David to bring down the giant Goliath.
- He chose to pare down Gideon's army from thousands to a few hundred so that no one would think that Israel had won a victory by her own strength.
- He chose to use someone like Simon Peter, a man who had failed, to deliver messages that resulted in the salvation of thousands.
- He used the healing of a beggar who had never walked to keep the fires of revival going in Jerusalem.

And when the Apostle Paul wanted to describe the kinds of people God was pleased to use for His purposes in the church, he listed, [*1 Corinthians 1:26*] *not many wise, not many noble, not many mighty.*

We are tempted to think, "*If 'so and so' (celebrity / athlete / politician) became a Christian, just think what God could do.*"

But God does not generally use the rich and powerful or the high and mighty to accomplish His great purposes.

If you have failed, rejoice. It's a big club and God still wants to use you.

If you are weak, rejoice. God delights to use us in our weakness to showcase His strength.

As we leave this place let's keep our eyes open for situations of desperate need and for people in desperate need. Watch for weakness, human frailty and failure, disease and disaster, suffering and persecution.

It is there that God may be expected to work. And we'll be right there, ready to open our mouths and tell others about our Jesus!