

Miracles of the Early Church: Peter and John heal a blind beggar: Acts 3:1-10

Leader's reflection

It's important not to ignore where this story occurs in the book of Acts. Acts 1 and 2 are the set-up, the big picture. They give us an idea of what is going on and what feeling of movement is in the church at this point. Then in Acts 3, we start to explore in more detail what that actually looks like. Yes, the church is growing, people are becoming believers each day and are sharing their possessions, but what does it look like for that to take place?

The words and actions of Peter and John show us just how much they have changed through their experiences with Jesus, with the Resurrection, and with Pentecost. The way they are described puts us in mind of the miracle stories of Jesus, the way they speak reminds us of the words of Jesus, and the results of their words show the power that was part of what made Jesus who He was, is now part of Peter and John.

The story itself is full of moments that make you think. Peter and John are going to the Temple complex; are they going to pray or to preach? The man is placed there everyday and has been for a long time; did he see Jesus? Why didn't Jesus heal him? Why didn't he ask Jesus to heal him? The response of the man to being healed is right out of the gospels too. He gets up and starts to leap and walk into the temple praising God.

A question to ask whenever we read scripture is; why am I being told this? The writer doesn't *need* to give us any information, so why are we told the things we are? Why are we told that the first thing he does is enter the temple? Because he has been kept out of the temple for so long. He has been unable to participate in the worship of God, he has been unable to make sacrifice for his sins, he has been separated from one of the most important parts of community life.



This again is a reference to the healings of Jesus; When Jesus healed it was never *just* a healing. There was always another level, another purpose, another element. Much of the time that other element was allowing people to become whole again. By becoming whole, I mean they were able to become full members of their community again. They were able to worship, to socialise, to participate, to contribute.

Healing in scripture is never *just* healing. There is always more to it if we look a little deeper and ask a few more questions.

Aim

To consider how Peter and John became more like Jesus

Main points to cover

1. Peter and John are becoming more like Jesus in the things they say and do.
2. The man is healed by God, *through* Peter and John.
3. The man's first reaction to being healed is to praise God, because he understands that good things come from God.

Focus On

How we become like the people we value

Activity ideas

Game: Explain that often we don't realise just how difficult life would be without certain things. Not being able to walk would make our lives much more difficult. Limit a key ability for each member of the group. For instance you could tie their legs together, or if they use a self propelled wheelchair you could tie their hands together. Have a list of simple things they need to do with their new limited ability. After a few of them ask how difficult they are finding the things. Remove the limitation and get them to do the same things and ask how much easier it is. Explain that the man in this story had to rely on other people for so much, and when he was healed he wasn't just healed, but everything in his world changed that day. Be sensitive, but perhaps less able-bodied members of your group might want to share their experiences to give extra insights

Looking like Jesus: Have a healing story from one of the Gospels to read alongside this. Mark 10:46-52 would work well. Ask the young people to read the two side by side and pick out the similarities between them. Ask them if they know why those similarities are there? Explain that in the book of Acts Jesus' followers start to become more and more like Him, and this tells us something really important about what it means to be followers of Jesus

What about me? Ask the young people if they think they could heal like Peter and John? Point out that the question is the wrong question, but instead should be, 'Can God heal people like He used to?' If the answer to that is yes (which it is), ask the young people why Peter and John were special. The answer is, they weren't any more special than you or I, but they spent time trying to become more like the man they followed. They were more concerned with people learning about God through Jesus than about getting it wrong or not healing from time to time. Explore with the young people what barriers are standing between them and becoming more like Jesus.



Miracles of the Early Church: Paul heals and is declared a god: Acts 14:8-30

Leader's reflection

Paul could never be accused of having a quiet life, and if you traveled with Paul you knew you were in for an interesting time! Paul and Barnabas have just fled from stoning in Iconium into the countryside and towns around, specifically Lystra which is where this rather unfortunate tale takes place.

Wherever they went, they would tell people about Jesus. In speaking in Lystra, Paul notices a lame man and heals him. The local people are amazed by this, and declare Paul and Barnabas gods, thinking that the god's must have come down in human form.

It is easy for us to read that and think of it as a simplistic way of seeing things, but it is exactly what happens when a miracle takes place today; the people then try to make sense of what has taken place by calling on their framework for understanding the world. Then it was their local greek religion; Now it is science.

The people are so blown away by the healing they call on the priest to come and bring sacrifices, and here we see the real measure of Paul and Barnabas. Without hesitation, without considering how useful it would be to be thought of as a god, they tear their clothes and rush into the crowd to explain what is actually happening, and point straight to God as the source of their power and authority.

Having stopped the crowd from sacrificing bulls to them things get worse as the Jews who drove them out of Iconium arrive to argue against Paul and Barnabas. They argue so persuasively against them that Paul is dragged out of the town after being stoned almost to death. But he gets up and walks straight back into the town.

We can see what the early church wanted to emphasise about these early evangelistic efforts by what is written about most. The next line, 'they made many disciples,' is easily passed over while the trials and tribulations of the apostles is focused on at length.



The early Church needed to know about the trials of those early evangelists, so that they didn't see it as a golden time when everything went right, but rather as a hard time through which God did incredible things. You would be forgiven to read these stories and see them as failures of evangelistic journeys, and yet there were churches founded from these hardships.

The early church did not have it easy; the early evangelists did not have it easy; and yet they persevered and saw fruit from their incredible work.

Aim	To see how Paul and Barnabas care more about sharing God's love than personal power
Main points to cover	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The people wanted to worship Paul and Barnabas.2. Paul and Barnabas didn't want this to happen.3. They knew that only God is worthy of worship, and wanted to make sure the local people knew that.
Focus On	Paul's response to being called a god, and on his perseverance in sharing God's love

Activity ideas

If I had a million pounds... Ask the young people to get into groups and think about what they would do if they were given £1million pounds. Give them some time to think about that, and then feedback to the group as you make a note of the things that they would do for themselves and those they would do for others. Explain that we can sometimes get an idea of our priorities by thinking like this. Ask them what they would do if they found an uncontested group of people who thought they were gods. Spend some time in groups thinking about this then feedback. Remind them that this is the exact situation that Paul and Barnabas found themselves in, and the way they responded tells us a lot about the sort of men they were.

Worship who? Start by asking the young people why they think Paul got so upset by the people wanting to worship him. Spend some time asking the young people why we worship God. What is it about Him that makes us worship? Why do we sing songs to Him? Write all those down on a large piece of paper. Now ask the young people which of those things they could say about themselves. Are there any that could apply to their own words and actions? Explain that this was why Paul was so upset; he knew that God deserves worship, but that Paul was only doing what God wanted him to do.

Why sacrifice? Ask the young people why they think the people wanted to sacrifice a bull to Paul (Hermes) and Barnabas (Zeus). Ask them to explain to you what a sacrifice is. Explain to them that to sacrifice something is to give something important to someone or something as a mark of how important they are. Tell them that there are examples today of people who sacrifice things to show that they love God, such as Scottish rugby player Euan Murray, who refuses to play on a Sunday so that he can be a part of a church. What do they think about giving things up to show how important God is to them? Ask them what they would be willing to give up, but remind them that it isn't a sacrifice for them unless they notice that they have given it up and they miss it.

Miracles of the Early Church: Paul bores a man to death and then brings him to life: Acts 20:7-12

Leader's reflection

This story also takes place during Paul's extensive travels around the Mediterranean to share the Good News, to strengthen the churches in their faith, and to continue in his oversight of the churches in the area.

The tone of the writer may hint either at the self-indulgence of Paul or, more optimistically, his desire to spend as much time with the church there as possible. 'Paul spoke to them and, since he was about to depart the next day, he extended his message until midnight.' Imagine how you would feel if a visiting preacher decided that the slot they had been given just wasn't enough and so extended their message by hours!

Eutychus is the unfortunate man who will forever be remembered as the one who fell asleep listening to Paul, but again the author hints that maybe he wasn't entirely to blame, and that he fell into a deep sleep as, 'Paul kept on speaking.' He then fell three stories out of a window and was thought to have been killed.

But here we get an insight into the sort of man Paul was. If a person is overcome by illness during our services what does the preacher do? Do they go to the aid of the person? Interrupt their message to assist? I would imagine (including myself in this), they would keep going and allow others to deal with the situation. But Paul stops. He is concerned for Eutychus and involves himself personally in assisting the man. In this we may see Paul's priorities, that to actively help is more important than to continue speaking. Actions speak louder than words.

But Paul is not long kept from speaking, and doesn't just keep going till midnight but keeps speaking till dawn. But he is no longer described as speaking but conversing. He is actively engaging with the people in the church. This shows us the context that Paul's letters were written in; an ongoing relationship with the people of the church.



They weren't dropped on them from a great height and expected to get on with it, but careful and intimate knowledge of the place and culture of these places would have informed what was said in them.... As an aside, this is why we should be careful in our use of the letters, and not just assume everything within them is a timeless truth.

Verses 17-20 show us the work that Paul put into his journeys, and the busyness of those journeys. Miletus was around 50 miles from Ephesus, so calling the Elders from Ephesus for a meeting was convenient for all of them, and would have saved a day's journey for Paul who wanted to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost.

The most important thing for us to see in this is the way that Paul gave so much of himself to allow others to be strengthened in their faith, and to allow them to share that faith with those around them... And stopping preaching to help a hurt man is probably something we should all remember.

Aim

To consider Paul's priorities; spending time with people and helping them when they needed it.

Main points to cover

1. Paul loved spending time with people, encouraging them and helping them.
2. Paul could talk, and talk, and talk, and talk
3. Even when he was talking about God, he knew that helping people was more important.

Focus On

What we can do to help the people around us and what stops us doing it?



Activity ideas

What was Paul really doing? When we read this story we can be misled by what we do in church to think that Paul was doing something similar. We assume that because we have preachers that Paul was doing something similar, but maybe he was doing a Q&A, maybe he was praying with people, maybe he was just sitting and talking. Ask the young people what comes into their mind when they read that Paul decided that he would keep speaking until midnight. Would they want to hear that? Explain that what Paul was doing was probably very different to what we see in church, and that we need to try and shake off our assumptions about church when we read stories like this one.

What would happen if... Come up with a series of weird hypothetical scenarios of strange things happening during a church service. Ask the young people what they think would happen in church if those things happened. What would happen to the worship, to the preach, to the prayers? They would probably keep going in all but the most extreme situations. Compare that with what Paul did when Eutychus fell out the window. He stopped what he was doing to help. Explore what this says about who Paul was and what his priorities were.

I would help but...Ask the young people if there are times when they could have helped someone but something stopped them. Try and think of an example from your own life, preferably one in which you don't shine, that will allow the young people to share themselves. Explain that like Paul, we should be willing to disrupt our own lives to help those around us. Jesus did the same, allowing himself to be led to where people needed Him. Explain that as we try and become more like Jesus, we will see opportunities to help others more often, and will be more willing to disrupt our own lives to help them. To finish use Mark 25:34-39 as a reflection at the end to help them see that whenever they help someone, they are also doing something of eternal value.

Miracles of the Early Church: Paul is declared a god again and heals plenty of people: Acts 28:1-10

Leader's reflection

The context this story takes place in matters hugely to the way we read it. Here is one of the shipwrecks that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians.

The previous three chapters outline the strange tale of how Paul came to be a prisoner in Rome. The Jews in Caesarea are essentially bringing a lawsuit against Paul. They claim that he is a rabble-rousing man who is agitating the Jews against the Romans. They search for a way to get rid of Paul by appealing to the need for peace in the Roman provinces in a way that is reminiscent of the way they persuaded Pilate to have Jesus executed. But Paul refuses to answer their claim, invoking his Roman citizenship and appealing to Caesar to settle the matter. This appeal to Caesar is a two edged sword. Because of it, Paul is transported to Rome and builds up the church there, but as the judge says, 'This man could have been released if he had not appealed to Caesar'.

Our reading takes place during the transportation of Paul from Jerusalem to Rome, and so Paul is no longer able to decide for himself where they go and what they do. Their ship is wrecked on Malta, and the people of Malta take care of the shipload of Roman soldiers and prisoners suddenly dumped on their doorstep; possibly as you would if you lived in a Roman province but more optimistically out of simple human decency.

They make a fire for the soggy wreckees, but as Paul is sitting there a viper comes out of the fire and bites him on the hand. Now interestingly there are no venomous snakes on Malta, so Paul not dying from the bite of it is not a surprise, but what is significant is the way that this is interpreted. Paul has just survived a shipwreck and immediately is attacked by nature. The locals interpret this as him being an evil man who has done something wrong and whom the gods are trying to get rid of. The omen of the snake bite is far more important than the effect of it. The Maltese would have



known the nature of the snakes on the island, but the snake bite and shipwreck coming in such close succession to one another would have made them wary. When Paul doesn't keel over, they decide he must be a god.

Again, the closeness of the two occurrences would have shown Paul to be a hardy man who was not easily killed. But here we see the impact being a prisoner has on Paul. He doesn't tear his clothes or declare that they are wrong because he is not able to. His actions are carefully controlled by his handler, who would have wanted to have as little fuss as possible on their journey.

Paul isn't kept quiet for long and after the healing of a prominent figure on the island is inundated with people coming to be healed. But there is no mention of preaching. Being accused of rabble-rousing, Paul would have been kept of a tight leash and you can imagine that allowing people to come to him for healing would have been one way of avoiding riots, but allowing him to speak publicly would have been a step too far for a dutiful Centurion just trying to do his job.

Aim

To think about the example of Paul's faith through the tough times

Main points to cover

1. Paul was a brave man.
2. Paul was brave because he understood that what God wanted him to do was the most important thing in his life.
3. Even when Paul was at a low point in his life, he still looked for opportunities to show the people around him God's love for them.

Focus On

How Paul is an example to us not because of how much he wrote, but because of what he did



Activity ideas

How was Paul feeling? Remind the young people that Paul wasn't just shipwrecked, he was also a prisoner. He was being taken to Rome to see the emperor and on his way this happened to him. This was not the first time either, this was the third time Paul had been shipwrecked. Once you have reminded the young people of this, ask them about how they think Paul was feeling. Encourage them to think creatively and to put themselves in Paul's shoes. Once you have a good number of words, ask them if they have ever had a time when they have felt like that. If they want to, ask them to share what made them feel like that and what they wanted to do when they felt like that. Talk a bit about how Paul could have just done nothing and felt sorry for himself, but that wasn't what he did...

Whatever is happening, Praise God: Ask the young people when they find it most easy to praise and worship and when they find it most difficult. What causes them to feel like they don't want to praise God. Give them 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 to read. What do they initially think of doing this? What do they think about this when they are reminded that Paul wrote it. When we know that the person who wrote those words was shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, chased out of towns, and hunted by people who hated him, does it change how we read it?

I don't feel like it: Ask the young people when they feel like God is closest to them. Write their answers on a board and see if they all have something in common. It may be that they are all during good times, or during peaceful times. Talk about how we often lose time for God when things get busy, but that is also the time that we need him with us most. Get the young people to think about how they could remind themselves to talk to God when things get tough for them. Make a note of them and get each young person to pick one that they are going to try.

