

03. Acts 3-4



Acts 2:42-44

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching [the new Torah], and communion [the new community], to the breaking of bread and the prayers [the new cult].

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together.

Their communion brings them 'together' in two senses: they are gathered in one place (Acts 2:44; see also 1:15; 2:1,47; 1 Corinthians 11:20; 14:23); and they are of one mind and heart (2:46; see 1:14). In fellowship they put whatever they have at the disposal of the community, with a view especially to helping the poor (see 6:1-7; 11:27-30). In this way they are a sign to the world of the love of God to which Jesus himself witnessed during his life on earth.

Acts 2:44-47

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

The Christian community life causes ‘awe to come upon everyone’, for in it people can see revealed the wonderful grace of God’s liberating and saving love. More and more are ‘being saved’ (compare 1 Corinthians 1:18), that is, they are experiencing the presence in their lives of the Spirit of Jesus (see Acts 2:21).

Acts 3:1-2

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple.





The two apostles, as devout Jews, are going into the temple (see Acts 2:46) at the hour of the evening sacrifice. It is also the hour of Jesus' death (see Luke 23:44). If the 'Beautiful Gate' is the gate known also as the Nicanor Gate, it was the entrance into the Court of Women from the Court of Gentiles. It was remarkable for its doors of Corinthian bronze. The apostles encounter a lame man. Being lame, he was considered 'impure' and so was among those excluded from entering the temple (see Leviticus 21:18; also Luke 7:22; 14:13,21). He can only beg for alms at the entrance.

Acts 3:3-8

When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.' And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the **name** of Jesus the Messiah from Nazareth, stand up and walk.' And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

'Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God ... He will come and save you.' ... Then the lame shall leap like a deer' (Isaiah 35:3-6).

Acts 3:9-10

All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognised him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

We are told later that he is ‘**over forty years old**’ (4:22). He is a symbol of the people of Israel, unable to enter the promised land during forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Though the Jews did return from exile in Babylon, they were still not free and so were awaiting their full return, led by the Messiah. It is Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah, through Peter and John, who makes it possible for this man to enter into God’s house of prayer (see Luke 19:45-46), demonstrating in this way that the kingdom has indeed been restored to Israel (see Acts 1:6).

Acts 3:11-13

While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished.



When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, ‘You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his **servant** Jesus, whom **you** handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him.

his servant Jesus

The title 'servant' is used of Abraham (Psalm 105:6,42) because of his faithful obedience to God. Likewise, Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5), David (Psalm 89:3; see Luke 1:69; Acts 4:25) and the prophets (Jeremiah 7:25). Especially significant is its use in the exilic writings of the scroll of Isaiah (Isaiah 42, 49, 50, 52-53), where God's servant perseveres in humble obedience to the mission given him by God, even through suffering and rejection.

Acts 3:14-16

But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

Peter reminds the people of their rejection of Jesus (compare 2:36). Jesus is the ‘Holy One’ (see Acts 2:27; Luke 1:35; 4:34), because of the intimacy of his communion with the all-holy God, and because he has been set aside to draw everyone into this same holiness. He is ‘the Righteous One’ (see Luke 23:47), because of his perfect obedience to God’s will.

Luke touches here on the important link between **salvation** and **faith** [see my commentary pages 57-64]. Faith is essential because salvation consists in communion in the life of God. Since God is love, the offer of salvation respects our freedom to welcome or to reject grace. To welcome God's offer is to 'be-lieve' (to 'be-in-love'). It is when Jesus sees the faith of the paralysed man and his friends, that he is able to say: '**Friend, your sins are forgiven you**' (Luke 5:20). Jesus is amazed at the faith of the centurion (Luke 7:9-10). To the sinful woman who anointed his feet in the home of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus says: '**Your faith has saved you; go in peace**' (Luke 7:50).

He speaks in the same way to the woman suffering from haemorrhages (Luke 8:8), to the Samaritan leper (Luke 17:19), and to the blind man (Luke 18:42).

In his parable of the sower, Jesus speaks about those who **'believe and are saved'** (Luke 8:12). On the lake, in the storm, he challenges his disciples to have faith (Luke 8:25). To Jairus in regard to his daughter, Jesus says: **'Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved'** (Luke 8:50).

Acts 3:17-21

And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer.

‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’

(Luke 23:34).

‘If they had understood, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory’ (1 Corinthians 2:8)

Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets.

They are witnessing the beginning of that time, the first fruits of God’s harvest. God is ‘restoring the kingdom to Israel’ (Acts 1:6).

Acts 3:22-26

Moses said, “The Lord your God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet like me. You must listen to whatever he tells you. And it will be that everyone who does not listen to that prophet will be utterly rooted out of the people” (Deuteronomy 18:15-17). And all the prophets, as many as have spoken, from Samuel and those after him, also predicted these days. You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, “And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.”

Peter is inviting his Jewish audience to open their hearts to the gift being offered them by God. In this way they will enjoy the Messianic blessings for themselves and be graced to fulfil the mission given to their people.

Acts 4:1-4

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. [see Luke 20:27-40]

So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about **five thousand**. [see Luke 9:14]

When Jesus healed a man with a withered hand in the synagogue on a Sabbath, he met opposition from the Pharisees (see Luke 6:11). This opposition continued (see Luke 11:53; 16:14). When he came to Jerusalem and challenged the way affairs were being conducted in the temple, he came up against a more powerful coalition: **‘The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him’** (Luke 19:47).

Acts 4:5-7

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem [Luke 22:66], with Annas the high priest [6-18AD], Caiaphas [18-36AD], John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?'





The Sanhedrin before whom Peter and John are summoned was recognised by the governing Roman authority as being responsible for matters internal to Judaism. Besides exercising religious and judicial authority within the Jewish community, they also controlled commercial and financial matters. This is the same court which had convened two months earlier to condemn Jesus and to hand him over to Pilate to be put to death (Luke 22:66).

Acts 4:8-10

Then Peter, filled with the **Holy Spirit** [Luke 21:12-15], said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, ¹let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom **you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.**

Those who witness to Jesus will suffer what he suffered, but he has promised to be with them: ‘**They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues ... This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict**’ (Luke 21:12-15).

Acts 4:11-12

This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' [Psalm 118:22; Luke 20:17]

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.'

In his explanation to the people of the significance of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, Peter quoted from Joel a passage which concludes with the words: 'Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved' (Acts 2:21). He concludes his explanation to the Sanhedrin on the same note.

Luke is appealing to the authorities to recognise in Jesus the one through whom the Lord has chosen to save. If they call upon him, they, like the man standing in their midst, will be restored.

This statement of Peter's should not be taken out of context. Luke is not attempting to answer the question of how God, in God's mysterious providence, brings to salvation those who have never heard of Jesus. Nor is he speaking of those who might think that they are rejecting Jesus, but who are in fact rejecting only the false Jesus who has been presented to them.

He is appealing to the authorities to recognise in Jesus the one through whom God has chosen to save. If they call upon him, they, like the man standing in their midst, will be restored. This is the 'today' (Acts 4:9), which God has chosen to 'restore the kingdom to Israel' (Acts 1:6).

The theme of salvation has been central to Luke's writing from the Prologue onwards. Jesus' name (Luke 1:31) means 'YHWH is **salvation**'. In Mary's song of delight in response to the gift of conception which resulted from God's embrace, she speaks of God as '**my Saviour**' (Luke 1:47). Zechariah praises God for having '**raised up a mighty Saviour for us in the house of his servant David**' (Luke 1:69). It is through Jesus that we are '**saved** from our enemies' (Luke 1:71). Since the main enemy of life is sin, for only sin can block us from welcoming God's grace, we experience '**salvation**' by experiencing '**forgiveness of sins**' (Luke 1:77).

When Jesus is born, he is proclaimed as ‘a **Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord**’ (Luke 2:11). Simeon, a symbol of all who have been waiting for the fulfilment of God’s promises, takes the child in his arms: ‘**My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel**’ (Luke 2:29-32).

John the Baptist is preparing the way for Jesus, in whom ‘**all flesh will see the salvation of God**’ (Luke 3:6). Jesus saw his mission as bringing salvation: ‘**The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost**’ (Luke 19:10; see also 6:9; 8:12). He insisted that we cannot save ourselves (Luke 9:24), and when he was tempted to do so himself (see Luke 23:35,37,39), he refused. Salvation can come only from God, the source of all life. We can reject it or we can welcome it. It consists in sharing in God’s own life, through the gift of God’s Spirit. It is Luke’s belief that God has given us Jesus to show us what salvation looks like in human terms, to draw us away from all that distracts us or separates us from true life, and, through his love, to share with us his own Spirit: his own intimate love with the Father.

In his Gospel, Luke selects examples of people who experience salvation through Jesus' ministry: the sinful woman who anoints Jesus' feet in the home of Simon the Pharisee (see Luke 7:50); the tormented man in the country of the Gerasenes (see Luke 8:36); the woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages (see Luke 8:48); the daughter of Jairus (see Luke 8:50); the Samaritan leper (see Luke 17:19); the blind man of Jericho (see Luke 18:42); and Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector (see Luke 19:9).

In Acts, Luke has presented 'Jesus of Nazareth' (Acts 2:22; 4:10), who was 'crucified and killed' (Acts 2:23,36), as having been raised to life by God (Acts 1:22; 2:24,32; 3:15,26; 4:10) and 'taken up into heaven' (Acts 1:11). God's 'servant' (Acts 3:13,26) has been 'glorified' (Acts 3:13). 'Exalted at God's right hand' (Acts 2:33) he has been made 'Lord' (Acts 1:6; 2:36) and 'Messiah' (Acts 2:36; 3:18,20; 4:10). Having received from the Father the fullness of the promised Holy Spirit, he is now offering a share in this same Spirit to all who welcome it (see Acts 2:33). It is in communion of love that we share in the very being of God; and it is in this communion that we experience salvation.

Peter proclaims to the Sanhedrin that God has chosen to bring about this promised salvation through Jesus ‘whom you crucified’. The man standing in front of them is living proof of this. They rejected Jesus. Now they are being offered another opportunity to respond to God’s grace. To continue in obstinate rejection of the Lord’s Messiah is to reject the covenant and the promise. It is to reject salvation.

Acts 4:13-18

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realised that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognised them as companions of Jesus. When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. They said, “What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

Acts 4:19-22

But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.'

After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened.

For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

He is a symbol of the people of Israel, unable to enter the promised land during forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

Acts 4:23-28

After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard it, they raised their voices **together** to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant [Psalm 2:1-2]:

‘Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples imagine vain things?
The kings of the earth took their stand,
and the rulers have gathered together
against the Lord and against his Messiah.’

For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

Once again, Luke looks beyond the reality of human cause and effect to focus on what it is that God is doing. His language must be handled with great care, lest we understand the word ‘**plan**’ or the word ‘**predestined**’ to imply that God acts in history like a puppeteer, and that human decisions are somehow inevitable. God does not exist in time. When we use past or future tenses to describe God, we must recognise that we are using terms that are inappropriate when speaking of the divine.

Luke's aim is not to deny or compromise human freedom or to suggest that the sinful action of crucifying Jesus was somehow part of an eternal plan, as though God could be responsible for intending something so obviously unjust and sinful. His aim, rather, is to lift our minds beyond the plain of human decision and to fix our eyes on what God is doing (compare Acts 2:22). The psalm speaks of the 'peoples' as imagining strange things. Peter identifies the peoples as 'Israel'. The psalm speaks of the 'kings of the earth'. Peter identifies them as Pilate and Herod (see Luke 23:7), who, urged on by the religious leaders of the Jews, acted to have the anointed one of God killed. God's will is revealed, not through their sinful action, but through the way in which his servant, Jesus, faithfully persevered in love through the painful trial.

Acts 4:29-31

And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the **name** of your holy servant Jesus.” When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken [compare Acts 16:25-26]; and they were all filled with the **Holy Spirit** and were speaking the word of God with boldness.

God's response to their prayer is to pour out his Holy Spirit upon them, as at Pentecost, when 'all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:4). We recall the following:

“Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently” (Exodus 19:18).

“Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked ... He bowed the heavens, and came down” (Psalm 18:7-9).

The same imagery occurs in the description of the vision of Isaiah: “The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke” (Isaiah 6:4).

Acts 4:32-37

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name **Barnabas** (which means 'son of encouragement'). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.