

The Book of Acts Study Guide

Chapters 3-4

3:1

The fact that Peter and John went to the temple to pray at what was called “the hour of prayer” (3:00 p.m.) indicates that they were continuing to worship in the common manner of the Jewish culture. It is noteworthy that they were following the custom of praying three times a day (*shacharit* – “morning,” *minchah* – “afternoon,” and *ma’ariv* – “evening”). This practice was not commanded in Torah. But the Talmud tells us that it began after the destruction of the first temple, when they could not perform sacrifices, and so they prayed at the same time when the sacrifices would have occurred (*Berakhot 26b*). So here we have the two most influential leaders of the new Messianic community continuing on in this worship custom. That reality communicates two important principles:

1. Instead of the Jewish way of worship being repudiated by later church leaders like Constantine and Eusebius, and continuing on into our present day in which the slightest acknowledgment of any Jewish culture practice is branded by some people as being Judaizing and sinful, clearly there was a validation of the Jewish way of worship by the Apostles.
2. Because there was no specific commandment involved, this is also an indication that God allows cultural practices as long as they are consistent with His revelation in Scripture. So that calls for caution against being dogmatic and restrictive in the way we worship God.

3:2-10

The healing of the lame beggar is significant because of the manner in which it was conducted. Peter did not hesitate to command the man to get up and walk in the name of Yeshua. He could exercise that degree of faith because in Mat 10:1, when Yeshua sent the disciples forth to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, He gave them authority to heal every kind of disease and sickness. So Peter was just doing what Yeshua had told him.

This passage does not teach, however, that this ability necessarily applies to all believers. Yeshua only gave that authority to His twelve disciples. So care must be taken in determining whether the context of a passage allows for a general application of a theological principle or a specific application to the stated subjects.

Once he was healed, the man responded just as virtually anyone would—walking, leaping and praising God. The other people at the temple then reacted in wonder and amazement because they had seen the man regularly begging at the gate.

3:11-26

The rest of this chapter is a record of Peter’s second sermon. Remember, his first sermon in chapter 2 was an explanation of what the people had witnessed on the day of Shavuot/Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came in an enduring manner, accompanied by profound manifestations of His presence. At that time, Peter explained the prophetic reality behind the miraculous event.

This time, his sermon explains the spiritual reality behind the miracle of the beggar’s healing. Peter begins his message in verse 13 with the phrase, “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers,” which comes from the opening line of the Amidah prayer that is the main prayer of the *minchah*/afternoon service that had just taken place. So Peter was using the

common culture to teach a spiritual point. In particular he was bringing attention to the need to make our prayers genuine and connected to reality, not just a ritual or religious experience.

Verses 13-15 are a summary of the role of people of Israel in God's plan regarding the death and resurrection of Yeshua.

- v. 16 – Peter declares that it was the man's faith in the name of Yeshua that led to his healing. This raises the question of whether there is a difference between having faith in Yeshua and faith in His name. In Hebraic thought, your name represented everything about you, from your personality to your reputation. This is manifested throughout the Bible in which the names of various characters reflect their character. So it was just a Hebraic way of saying that the man had faith in the person of Yeshua, and should not be thought in terms of something mystical about the name, like a force that can be utilized.
- v. 17 – Peter acknowledges that the people “acted in ignorance.” The Greek term, *agnoia* means “not to know.”
- v. 18 – shows that it was God's plan for Messiah to suffer (to the point of death). Thus the people acted in ignorance or did not know that God's plan of redemption was being carried out, and they were just the means for doing so. That serves as a reminder that God uses us for His purposes, but we may be ignorant of that happening.
- v. 19 – This verse shows that even the most serious sins, including killing the Son of God, can be wiped away through repentance and faith in Yeshua. That serves as a reminder to us that we cannot think of ourselves as being too sinful for God to forgive.

The KJV uses the phrase, “repent and be converted.” That does not imply changing your religion, like converting from being a Jew to a Christian, as many people claim. The Greek phrasing here literally means “think differently and therefore turn around.” That is an important understanding for us to have, for there are many people out there today who have an incorrect understanding of the Hebraic/Greek concept of conversion. It does not refer to a new religion, but changing your thinking and actions in whatever culture you belong. In those days, there was no Christianity as we know it today. Believers in Yeshua continued to worship and be considered as Jews. Today, that same option exists in the Messianic way of life and worship. And just as it was true in that day in Acts 3, today it is available for ethnic Jews and Gentiles alike. One does not stop being an ethnic Jew or Gentile when believing in Yeshua. You just think and act differently than before.

Peter concludes his sermon by showing how the prophets foretold about Yeshua. Verse 22 is a quotation from Deut 18:18. We know that this was considered to be a Messianic prophecy in second temple times because both Moses and the Messiah were identified with the same term “The Prophet” (Deut 34:10; Jn 1:21; 6:14; 7:40. See also Maimonides' Seventh Principle of Faith). How is Yeshua like Moses?

- They both spoke *for* God, although Yeshua also spoke *as* God.
- Moses communicated the Torah to the people, and Yeshua upheld it and communicated its validity in His teachings and modeling it in His life.
- Moses established the priesthood, and Yeshua is now our High Priest.
- Moses established the sacrificial system, and Yeshua was the final, perfect sacrifice.
- Moses interceded for the people of Israel, and Yeshua intercedes for believers.

vv. 25-26 – Peter calls his Jewish audience, “sons of the prophets and of the (Abrahamic) covenant.” It has been traditionally claimed in Judaism that possession of that covenant by virtue of birth is sufficient for securing a place in the World to Come (i.e., see how Nicodemus expressed that sentiment in John 3). But this passage teaches that people still have to turn from their wicked ways, and earlier in v. 16 we are given the affirmation of the necessity of faith in Yeshua (notice also in John 3 that Yeshua declared to Nicodemus that he had to be “born again,” meaning a spiritual birth in addition to a physical birth).

4:1-6

Peter’s sermon produced different results for two groups that heard the same message. 5,000 men who were at the temple became believers. But the Sadducees had Peter and John arrested because they were proclaiming the reality of the resurrection in Yeshua and the Sadducees opposed that belief. They were descendants of the priests who returned to rebuild the second temple, and were dedicated to the Torah alone and its priestly duties. Thus they gave little credence to the prophets where the resurrection and eternal life were emphasized.

The next day, the highest level of leaders showed up. Annas is identified here as high priest, but that is a term of respect just as former presidents of the U.S. are recognized with the same title after leaving office. Annas was the high priest 15 years earlier, but continued to have unofficial influence for the rest of his life, most notably when Yeshua was brought before him first before he was sent to the actual high priest, Caiaphas (Jn 18:19-23). At that time Caiaphas charged Yeshua with blasphemy and then sent Him to Pilate, which led to Yeshua’s death. Since this was only a few months later, Caiaphas was still the official high priest and would continue in that role for another five years. They were both Sadducees, so they were aggressive in punishing anyone who promoted the resurrection of the dead and life in the World to Come. It is uncertain who the other two men were in v. 6, but they were related somehow to the two high priests, Annas and Caiaphas. Together these 4 individuals had considerable influence in the community.

4:7-12

Based on their approach in v. 7 it does not appear that these leaders realized there was a connection between the commotion over the healing of the beggar and Yeshua whose death they had facilitated a short time earlier. Perhaps they just thought that they had some different troublemakers to deal with. In any event, their question in v. 7 and Peter’s answer beginning in v. 9 teaches us about witnessing that whenever someone opens the door by directly asking a question, we need to respond boldly and in a spirit-filled manner.

Remember, this is Peter who denied Yeshua three times during the night before the crucifixion. But 50 days later the Holy Spirit came upon Peter along with the other believers, and now he was capable of acting in an entirely different way—a spirit-filled way that gives us boldness and clear recall of God’s Word. That is evident in his two sermons that are much more comprehensible and insightful than you would expect from a Galilean fisherman.

Peter’s answer in vv. 9-12 to the question has three elements that serve as a model for witnessing:

- Yeshua is the one who changes lives and the healed man is evidence of that fact (v. 10).
- Yeshua is the one who the prophets foretold, and what just happened a short time ago with the builders/leaders of Israel rejecting Him is evidence of that fact (v. 11; see Ps

118:22).

- Yeshua alone is the way of salvation, and His name is evidence of that fact because biblical names communicate character and calling (v. 12).

In the verses that follow, it is obvious that the leaders did not respond enthusiastically to what Peter had to say. But it did not stop Peter from being a witness and doing it in a godly, strategic way. The same is true for us. We need to be faithful, just as Peter was faithful in speaking the truth about Yeshua and then leaving the rest in God's hands and in His timing.

4:13-22

The leaders then face a quandary. They finally recognize Peter and John as disciples of Yeshua. And the leaders don't like what they are doing and would probably like to punish them. But the problem is that the beggar was obviously healed, so it would not look good publicly to do so. They decided to avoid such controversy, and they just try to bully Peter and John into no longer speaking about Yeshua. To sum up their actions, they ignored the facts, acted in a politically correct manner, and applied social pressure to conform to the dominant point of view.

Verse 20 is one of the greatest declarations in all of Scripture. It supports the validity of the Bible because these men saw and heard things directly with their own eyes and ears. It was not second-hand news. So they knew it was not a lie or a legend, which would not move you to risk it all by defending it. Instead, when you have experienced something like that, your motivation to testify regarding the truthfulness of the matter is enhanced exponentially, even to the point of being willing to die for the truth. And that was indeed the case with Peter, who made it clear in his second epistle that he would die for his faith in Yeshua (2 Pet 1:14,15; Jn 21:18,19). He wrote that letter while in prison about 35 years after this account in Acts 4, and a short time later, he was martyred for his faith. We also know that according to tradition, Peter was crucified upside down because he believed he was unworthy to die in the same manner as Yeshua. The other disciples met similar fates, some were crucified, others were stoned or speared or decapitated. Only John died a natural death, and that was while being an exiled prisoner on the barren island of Patmos where God inspired him with the message of the book of Revelation. The point is that these men were all willing to live their lives and to give them up because they knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that everything they were saying about Yeshua was true.

Peter and John were given some more threats and then sent on their way.

4:23-37

When they returned to their fellow believers, it was a time for rejoicing and prayer. In their prayer in verses 25-26, they quoted from Ps 2:1-2, a passage that was agreed to be Messianic in nature by the ancient rabbis. So you have a depiction in advance of rulers coming against the Messiah, as was clearly the case with Yeshua. But that was not the full story because other people were involved. The list of guilty parties in verse 27 shows that it was not just Jews who were responsible for the death of Yeshua, it was Gentiles as well, which therefore represents the people of the world in the way that God identifies them in Scripture. That renders untrue the anti-Semitic argument that Jews alone deserve punishment for killing Jesus.

And not only that, according to v. 28, ultimately it was God's plan, not man's error. That is consistent with Yeshua's declaration in John 10:18 about his life and death – "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative."

The end of chapter 4 is similar to the end of chapter 2 but also with one difference. In the previous passage the baptism with the Holy Spirit that was accompanied by speaking in other languages and, as the grammar and context shows, it was a one-time historical event that created a unity of believers. Here in 4:31, they were *filled* with the Spirit, resulting in their ability to speak the word of God with boldness. That is exactly what Peter did earlier in verse 8. And it will be repeated a number of times with various believers (Acts 5:3; 9:17; 13:9,52; Eph 5:18). So unlike the one-time historical event of the baptism with the Holy Spirit, the filling of the Spirit is an on-going occurrence that enables believers to be witnesses through boldness and recall of the Word of God. All this to say that it is important to use biblical terms correctly, to understand their place in history, and to apply them properly to our lives when relevant. That's what it means, in part, to "rightly divide the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15).

Then, once again, we see how the believing community functioned cooperatively, even sacrificially, as people sold their property for the Apostles to use in ministering to the body.