

TJW, HT, 12.10.08, 9.15am & 11am, Acts 3.1-4.31

I know of a family who recently suffered a tragic loss - their 16-year-old son died quite suddenly.

This is a committed Christian family - and a couple of days after he died, his Dad has said that he came across some Bible-study notes his son has been using, a few days before he died. There in the notes was this question: "How much is God in control of your life?". His son had written next to that question, one word: "fully".

That's a good thing to be sure of, isn't it, if it turns out you only have a couple more days to live.

It's also a good thing to be sure of if it turns out that you still have years to live, because why would you want to live them without having your creator in control of your life?

How much have you consciously put God in control of your life?

Is he in control of how you behave with your family?

Is he in control of your values and attitudes at work?

The reason I've started with that question is because that is the question which God asks us in the Bible, through this event, which we heard read out - this event of the healing of the disabled man - the man who couldn't walk.

He's aged over 40, the Bible tells us - so that's old, I guess!

Everyone knows that, right from birth, he's never been able to walk.

He lives in Jerusalem, in the time of Jesus, and every day he gets carried down to the Jewish temple, to lie there at the entrance gate begging for money. Many of us who have ever travelled in Asia or Africa will have seen similar sad scenes of disabled people begging.

Now two Christians come along. Everyone knows that a few weeks earlier this trouble-maker called Jesus of Nazareth has claimed to be the Messiah - and he'd been executed. His followers were going around saying that he had come back to life - had ascended to heaven, to reign as king over the world alongside God - and that he'd sent his Spirit, his own power, into everyone who accepted him.

And two of those followers, called Peter and John, come up to this beggar, and say to him: "We haven't got any money to give you - but we'll give you what we've got. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth - walk!".

They take his hand - and instantly the man legs and ankles get a strength in them that they've never had his entire life, and he leaps to his feet and starts jumping around, shouting, "Thank God! Thank God!".

A crowd gathers around, saying: "We know this man. He's never been able to walk in his entire life. What kind of power have you two got, to heal him like this?!".

And Peter quietens them down, and talks to them.

He says this: **1. God made Jesus alive...**

and it's Jesus who's done this miracle. This miracle proves that God raised Jesus from the dead - see how he says that - chapter 3, verse 13 [READ 3.13-16].

The people had tried to get rid of Jesus - tried to cut him out of their lives - and they thought they'd done it pretty successfully when he was up there dying on the cross.

But Jesus hadn't gone away. God had raised him from the dead. Lots of people had seen him. And now here was miraculous proof that he was still alive.

The same is true for us, as for them. Jesus didn't stay dead.

We may try, like they did, to keep pushing him to the edges - but he will want to keep coming back to the centre of life. Because he's 'the author of life' - the one who made us - and he's alive.

That's why we have to ask: Is God in control of my life? Because Jesus is alive, he should be.

So what have we got to do? God made Jesus alive... **so repent (3.1-26).** Verse 19 [READ verse 19].

God made Jesus alive - and in doing so he demands something from us - and offers something to us.

Here's the demand: repent.

Two months earlier, some of the people in this same crowd had been there, screaming for Jesus to be crucified.

Now, here in front of them, in this disabled man who could suddenly walk - was evidence that they had committed a terrible crime. They had sent to his death the man who can give life.

So they'd have to repent. They'd have to admit to God that they'd been terribly in the wrong trying to push Jesus out, when all the time he was the one who should have been in control of their lives.

Let me tell you something about the way Christians sometimes present Jesus. We can make it sound like putting your trust is just all lovely. And in a way it is - Jesus will bring you a joy and an assurance and a life like you'll find nowhere else.

But sometimes Christians play down the tough truth about becoming a Christian...

Admitting to God that I've been in the wrong about him all these years.

Admitting - and this might be an even harder thing to admit - admitting to my family and to my friends and to myself that I've just been finding one excuse after another not to take God seriously in my life.

I once heard a man, who'd just become a committed Christian, saying something interesting. He said that what brought it all together for him was when someone explained repentance to him. Before then, Christian faith had just been made to sound too 'nice' to him - too easy.

But he was a man who liked a challenge - and God's call on him to repent sounded real, it sounded like a challenge - it sounded like what God would really say to him if he was real: "Stop what you're doing. Turn round and follow me."

God got this crowd's attention through healing this man.

I don't know what the ways are in which he's sometimes got hold of your attention in your life - but he will have done, for all of us, in one way or another.

And once he's got our attention, here's his demand: Jesus is alive - so repent.

But I also said that, in Jesus being alive, God makes an offer to us.

And that's there in verse 19, too [READ].

If we repent, then sins are 'wiped out', and 'times of refreshing' come.

If you want to see what an offer this, remember that this offer was being made to people who were personally responsible for killing Jesus.

If Jesus can wipe that sin out - the greatest sin ever committed - trying to kill the God who gives us life - if he can wipe that out, then so can he wipe out the guilt and failing and sin that haunts you the most.

To those who repent, he offers forgiveness... and also what he calls "times of refreshing."

That probably means... the benefits - the blessings - of living with Jesus alive at the centre of your life - no longer "fiddling around" with God from time to time when you feel the need - no longer just hoping that your life is on track - but knowing that you are free, forgiven, to live your life with God forever.

If you've been here over the last few weeks, as we've been preaching through this book of Acts, you might have noticed that what we've seen so far in chapter 3 is very close to what we saw in chapter 2: something miraculous happens - here it's a healing - there it was people speaking in languages they'd never learned. And both times the crowd asks: "what's going on." And both times the apostle Peter stands up and says: "It was Jesus who did this. This happened to get you to trust him. God has made Jesus alive. We've witnessed him alive again. He's done miracles that prove he's alive. So repent."

But now chapter 4 brings in a new element. At the end of chapter 2 we're told that these new Christians "enjoyed the favour of all the people".

Now things change, and we start to see that... **2. There'll be opposition.**

The religious authorities realise that Jesus is a threat to their position. His followers are preaching a new message of Jesus alive - and the authorities don't like this 'new religion'.

So they arrest Peter and John, put them in the cells overnight, and then question them - do you see verse 7 of chapter 4? [READ].

True, living Christian faith nearly always provokes opposition. Jesus did - so much that they killed him to try and get rid of him.

Some of you know what it's like to be opposed at work for wanting to be true to Christ in every detail of your business, and your work. Others have found opposition even in your own families.

Opposition like that is not a sign that God has taken his blessing from you. Actually the opposite - it's a sign that Jesus is alive, and is working in you.

No one bothers fighting against a useless enemy, do they - they only fight if their enemy is an effective, powerful threat to them.

But someone who's thinking hard about committing to Christ will ask: How can I stand against opposition?

Well, says chapter 4 - opposition will come **- but God is stronger (4.1-22).**

Jesus gives the power to face the opposition. See verse 8 of chapter 4 [READ]. God strengthened him by his Spirit, just when he needed it.

And Jesus gives conviction - conviction that he alone is the truth - verse 12 [READ].

God has only ever made one person alive again, and ruler of the world alongside him. Only Jesus, and no one else, is saviour.

And Jesus gives courage. Verse 13 [READ].

And you can see that courage in action in verse 18 [READ verses 18-21].

These men aren't scared of anyone, are they? Who wouldn't want that - to be afraid of nothing in this world, except for the fear of going against what God says is right?

No one should pretend that repenting and turning to Christ doesn't seem scary.

But Jesus stands ready to give you power to face what'll come - the conviction that he is the truth, he is your saviour - and the courage to live in this world, with him in control.

Right now everyone is worried about financial risks. Banks that used to look as safe as houses, now seem shaky. Stuffing your cash under your pillow might be the best option left to us next week.

But Jesus makes an unshakable guarantee - if we repent, and invest our lives in him. Opposition will come, but he is stronger.

And in the final part of this incident, the Bible tells us what the Christians did, when Peter and John were released from jail.

They got together, and they prayed - verse 24 [READ verses 24-31].

That prayer proves that they knew that...

3. No one can defeat God (4.23-31).

In this prayer they tell God two things that God already knows full well about himself.

So really they're reminding themselves of what's true about God.

First, he made everything. He is Lord. You can never escape him - nothing and no one can escape the fact that he made them, and they owe their existence to him.

Second, his creatures can never defeat him. When they tried to - when they killed even his own Son - that just turned out to be something that God had decided beforehand would happen.

You can never outflank God. Never get the better of him. Never creep away from him unnoticed. Never ignore him in your life, and have a good excuse for doing it.

If you're a Christian today, and you'll be heading home from here into opposition - or you'll driving into work tomorrow, into opposition - remember to pray this way: "Lord, you are sovereign, you made me, you made those who oppose me. Lord, you can never be defeated. My own feelings of weakness can't defeat your purposes. And no opposition I face can defeat you."

And for someone who's not yet a committed Christian this morning, can I put it this way? God has shown himself stronger than you. He's made you a wonderful offer. Now is the time to stop trying to defeat him in your life - holding him at bay - giving him the slip. Is now the time for you, with huge sigh of relief, to put him in full control of your life?

The religious authorities here show us how uncomfortable it is trying to sit on the fence about Jesus - sitting on a fence is always pretty painful.

Did you notice that they don't deny that God raised Jesus from the dead?

They couldn't deny it, because too many people knew it was true. And they don't deny that this disabled man was miraculously healed. They couldn't deny it - because too many people had seen him healed.

They know there's something powerful going on in this religion of Jesus - but they still won't have him in control of their lives.

That's a really uncomfortable place to be.

How much better for those who repent and turn to Christ. Opposed and persecuted - yes. But now they belong to God - and he is stronger. He cannot be defeated, and so neither can they.

He is in control of their lives - fully.