

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon.² Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts.³ When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money.⁴ Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!”⁵ So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

⁶ Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”⁷ Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong.⁸ He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.⁹ When all the people saw him walking and praising God,¹⁰ they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. (Acts 3:1-10)

God’s Gifts are Better

Several years ago, I got a flier in the mail from a local car dealership. They wanted me to trade in my car and buy a new one. Because they wanted my old car so badly, they offered me a free gift. If I just came in, they would give me a brand new socket wrench set, even if I didn’t buy anything. Well, free is always a good deal right? So I went and they gave me the socket wrench set. While I wasn’t terribly surprised, I was a little disappointed. I had hoped that it would be a really nice set. But, of course it turned out to be a very cheap set with only a handful of sockets. But it was free, so I really didn’t have anything to complain about. But have you ever been in a situation where you expected better and you didn’t get it? I’m terrible about remembering birthdays. It sometimes happens that my wife will say to me, “Today’s your dad’s birthday.” She knows better even to ask, “Did you get him anything?” Even when I do remember, I always wonder if he really likes what I gave him or if he just sighs at what a failure I’ve turned out to be, at least in this area of my life. Well, however disappointing the gifts we give or the gifts we receive may be, or however wonderful those gifts are, **God’s gifts are better.**

I.

Better than what? **God’s gifts are better than we expect.** In life, we have expectations about the gifts we’ll get from specific people. My dad’s expectations of me are probably as low as they could get. But he has other children who do much better and I’m sure he expects more. Well, what expectations do we have for the gifts that God gives us?

The man at the heart of our lesson from the book of Acts today had an expectation. In the next chapter, it says that he was about forty years old when these events happened. And Luke tells us in these verses that he had been crippled from birth. Peter and John, the disciples of Jesus, were going into the temple when they met him. Understand, this was in the earliest days of the Christian Church. Jesus had ascended into heaven and then sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost and he had given the apostles dramatic gifts to do miracles. But the man sitting at the gate didn’t know them. He wasn’t there to see a miracle. He was there for the same reason he came every day: to beg. You see, at that time, there were no government services for people who were handicapped. Very few of them could work and support themselves. So either their families took care of them or they became beggars. Not surprisingly, many beggars gathered outside the temple, hoping that religious people would help them in their need.

So what did this man expect that God would give him on this particular day? He asked Peter and John for money. And that’s what he thought he’d get. But Peter said, **“Silver or gold I do not have. But what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”** Peter took him by the hand and pulled him to his feet and instantly, his feet and his ankles became strong. Peter didn’t put him on one of those bicycle machines to build up his muscle tone first. This man didn’t have to spend any time at all in physical therapy learning how to walk. As soon as Peter pulled him up, a man who had never learned to walk began to walk and jump and leap. He began to shout for joy and praise God because this was much better than anything he had expected to get that day. Probably the only people here today who can appreciate just how great this gift was,

are those who suffer mobility problems themselves. But obviously, this was the answer to a lifetime of dreams and prayers, something that he never thought was really going to happen to him.

Before this man was healed, God tells us that he was **“carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts.”** He couldn’t get there on his own so he had people who were committed to getting him there every day. And people who came regularly to the temple were used to seeing him there. After the miracle, Luke says, **“When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful.”** This was no con. This was no staged healing. People knew him and helped him regularly. People saw him day after day sitting there begging and they knew he could not walk. God made sure that we understand that this miracle was real.

And God records the amazement of those people who recognized him. Now this was no more than a few months after Jesus died and rose. Jesus had healed hundreds, if not thousands of people, many of them in Jerusalem. Yet, when the people saw this miracle, they were just as amazed as they had been when Jesus walked among them. Just to make sure they made the connection, Peter told him to walk “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” They were not starting something new. They were continuing something that God had started three years before, something that God had promised centuries before. In our Old Testament lesson for today, Isaiah was talking about the Messiah. He said, **“Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.”** You heard in the gospel lesson how Jesus healed a man who was deaf and unable to speak. That was a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. And God gave the apostles the power to continue that miraculous ministry, so that the people could see the connection between Jesus and the men he sent out after he ascended into heaven.

This man went to the temple to beg like he did every day. He was not expecting Jesus to heal him. God had a surprise in store for him. What do we expect from God? Do we trust that God can solve all the problems of our lives here? Or are we so focused on the practicalities of our scientific age that we really don’t put our trust in God? A year or two ago, I did a Bible study on prayer. I found a website that had dozens of clips of religious leaders talking about prayer. In one clip a rabbi said that when you go to the hospital, you shouldn’t pray for God to make you better. That’s not God’s job. It’s the doctor’s job to make you better, he said. It’s God’s job to make you brave. Do we ever think like that? In our society, it’s almost our default setting. What causes illnesses? Viruses, poor sanitation, and genetics. What causes car accidents and house fires and marital problems? On one level, there are natural causes for all those things. But God decides when we have to suffer them and when we don’t. God decides how long and how hard our suffering has to be. God decided that this man would live for forty years without walking before the day Peter healed him. Why not forty days? Why decades of frustration and pain? I don’t know, but God in his love made that determination.

And God decided to heal him on that day. I don’t know why he had to wait forty years. But I do know that God loved this man and he proved it. God sent his Son to the cross to pay for this man’s sins. And he sent him to the cross to pay for you and me, too. When we suffer and we ask God for relief and when relief doesn’t come as soon as we want it to, look to the cross! You see the full measure of God’s love there. If God loved you so much that he sent his Son to die there for you so that your sins are paid for and you will have eternal life, then he will love you when he decides what you have to suffer and how long it has to last. Trust him.

And God showed his power when he raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus’ body wasn’t just crippled. Jesus’ body wasn’t just scourged and beaten, it didn’t just have nails driven through its hands and feet. Jesus’ body was dead. And it stayed dead from Friday evening until Sunday morning. Ask any nurse if you can do CPR more than twenty-four hours after a heart stops beating. You can’t. It was impossible for medical science to bring Jesus back. Yet he rose. He rose because he won the victory over death and hell and the devil. He rose because he defeated all our sin and took away all our punishment and God wanted us to know that we have eternal life. When he rose, he showed that God has the power to rescue us from everything sin does to us here, from every illness and broken relationship and emotional problem.

Do we trust him to do that? Do we ask him to rescue us from all the evil that sin does to us here and trust that he will hear and answer? When God says that the best thing for us is to continue in our suffering until his time comes, do we trust and continue to pray while we wait? Too often, we just don’t take God’s power or his love seriously. Our lack of trust is just sin. Why should he help people who don’t trust him to? He shouldn’t. But he does. He does because Jesus died and took all that sin away. Jesus died even for our failure

to trust him. Jesus died because we think it's our doctor's job to make us well and our government's job to keep us safe and our therapist's job to fix our relationships. But as much as we use those people, it's all God's job. And he will cure you, here or in heaven. Don't limit your expectations of what God can do for you. Pray for miracles! But trust God even when he chooses not to send them.

II.

God gives us rich gifts. But sometimes, we're so focused on the here and now that we lose perspective on which of his gifts are the most important. But God never loses perspective. **God's gifts are better than temporary healing.** What happened to this man that Peter healed? Did he become a believer and join the Christian Church? That seems likely, but we don't know. He's never mentioned again. Even if he did become an active member of the Jerusalem congregation, even if he got a job and got married and raised children, the truth is, the healing God gave him that day was temporary. I don't mean that it somehow wore off. He was fully healed. But he lived two thousand years ago. Eventually he died. Maybe he lived a long and healthy life after this and died in his sleep. Maybe other health problems ended his life shortly after this. But the day came when that body that Peter healed had to be buried and those who loved him had to say goodbye.

The healing didn't change that because it didn't change the fact that he was a sinner. All sinners die. So why did God heal him on that day? Certainly, because he loved him; but even more, God healed him to point to the gospel. The crowds gathered and Peter preached to them about Christ. God wanted his people to know that Jesus' ministry was not finished. They needed that information because all their lives were going to come to an end, too. And so are ours. A funny thing happened to me the other day. I was reading a news article online and an ad popped up and asked, "Will death catch you unprepared? Not if you have life insurance. Get a free quote. Click here." As important as life insurance is, death will not catch you unprepared because you have the greatest gift of all. You have Jesus. Because of Jesus, God answers our prayers. He rescues us again and again from sorrow and grief and hurt. And he has given us faith that trusts in him in all those hardships. That's a huge gift! But the greatest gift of all is eternal life. That, too, comes through Jesus. No matter how good we have it here, we are going to die someday, unless Jesus comes back first. But when our time here is done, God will call us home to heaven. When the time is right, Jesus will return and raise the dead. If we're still alive, he'll transform us at that moment. If we're dead, our bodies will live again. Either way you and I will live in a perfect world with Jesus forever.

Next year, I have to try harder to make sure I remember my dad's birthday and get him a gift that reflects the role he's played in my life. But no matter how well I do, God's gift will always be better. Your sins are washed away. You have eternal life. You have faith in your Savior. You have God to hear and answer every prayer you ever offer. Knowing we have those blessings gives us hope and comfort and strength while we face the tears and sorrows here. What better gifts could you ever receive? Amen.