

A Beggar Convicts the Nation

From Acts 3 & 4

by Lynn Andrew

Peter and John, full of the Spirit of God, are approaching the Temple in Jerusalem with some unspecified expectation. Are they aware of the history-making roles to which they have been called? We might assume they have in mind to share what they know with anyone who will listen—sharing the life-saving knowledge of who Jesus really is. But as for a wider audience, what possibility do they have? They have no authority in the temple, no office among the leaders, no platform from which to speak. They might encounter one or two of their acquaintances or perhaps some who remember them as disciples of the recently-executed Nazarene. For such souls they have ready news, especially for those who still think Jesus is dead—good news; news that should electrify any person who has paid attention to the prophets. In the book of Isaiah, God foretold that his Christ would suffer; and Jesus proved himself to be the fulfillment of that prophecy, the man whom death could not hold, whom heaven received, and who now awaits acknowledgment and repentance from the leaders of Israel in order that he may restore all things as he promised through all the prophets. But now—in this moment before any of that comes to pass—Peter and John are going up to the temple with the news that God is offering to blot out the sins of any individual who reaches out to him like an empty-handed beggar, placing confidence in the promise that salvation is by faith in the name of Jesus—who is the Christ.

So the two apostles are aware, at least, that some spiritual potential awaits their presence on this particular afternoon. When they reach the Beautiful Gate a lame man will notice them, and in them he will see what is to him an important potential—the possibility of a coin or two.

Though the apostles may be underestimating their own roles, it is nothing compared to the lame beggar's infinitely mistaken opinion of himself. He is in fact an extremely important man in the plan of God: he was born to suffer in order to confront the leaders of Israel and force them to make their final decision. He was destined to appear on the pages of Scripture. He will be remembered forever.

As Peter and John approach, the lame man is being set down in his usual place among other beggars, having been carried to this gate, the place where he makes his living through the kindness of those who pity an Israelite excluded from the house of God, a fellow citizen who must wait outside the temple during times of prayer until his employer comes and judges his worth by the coins others have dropped into his jar. If that employer, whose trade is transporting beggars, felt any urgency in getting this coin gatherer to his place at the time of the afternoon prayer, it was only to have him exposed to the maximum number of people. That he was a little late today was perhaps due to some unexpected obstacle. Let us say it was a miracle that he got settled just before Peter and John arrived in spite of any obstacles: it had to be, for this was the plan of God.

For most of his forty years this nameless man has been one of those outcasts from whom we divert our eyes. He lives in poverty of body, mind, and soul. He watches the worshipers parading past him, hoping to spy one of those who regularly contribute to his need. Now he sees Peter and John. He knows who they are: followers of the healer the Romans crucified. He had witnessed Jesus healing cripples, but as often as he raised his voice to join the clamoring crowd, just that often Jesus passed him by, just that often he was ignored. But he remembers that Peter once give him a shekel and John had seemed to him a perceptive man, for John did not completely ignore him but looked at him as if he saw something unusual. Peter it seemed had attempted to direct Jesus' attention to him on one occasion, but another had received healing instead.

Now Peter and John are here without their leader, and John is drawing Peter's attention to him. The cripple has no expectation of a miracle, but

he believes they are good men and compassionate. He waves his right hand as they approach and feebly mouths the beggar's words. Peter stops and stares at him. And so does John. They are showing him that they have no money in their hands and carry no purse. Then why did they stop? The beggar senses a holiness about them. It seems they retain some authority from their master, and he lowers his eyes and drops his hand.

"Look at us!" Peter commands.

The lame man raises his hand again, but an acute feeling of shame in their presence prevents him from looking up. If they are prophets of God, they must condemn him, for he holds a grudge against the Lord and hates the sound of thanksgiving psalms.

"Look at us!" Peter repeats. "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise and walk."

Peter's object, as he reaches down and grasps the begging hand, is to dispense what healing power Jesus is allowing for the infirmity of this suffering individual. Having walked past him many times, Peter is feeling a sense of relief that the healing power is welling up in him. Not that he is unaware of the notoriety that could come of this act of kindness, for he was with Jesus on occasions when enemies were made by healing a man's lifelong infirmity. But does Peter anticipate that the beggar will so advertise the event that tomorrow the three of them will find themselves thrust onto a platform where his words will reach the ears of the very men who persuaded Pilate to have Jesus nailed to the cross?

Tomorrow, Peter, you will stand before the rulers and elders and scribes, together with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander and all who are of the high-priestly family. You will stand before them because the healing of this man will be a sign to them. And the lame man then in perfect health will stand beside you, and they will remember those malformed feet. You will lay before them the condition under which the prophesied Kingdom will commence. If they accept

God's terms of repentance, Christ will return and healing will come to the nation as it now is coming to this man.

Peter lifts the beggar by his right hand, and to everyone's surprise the man leaps up on perfectly strong ankles and feet without hesitating even a moment to learn to use them; and he begins praising God, reciting a psalm he used to hate. Those who see him walking are aghast. They all knew of his misshapen feet and knew that he would never walk.

Now Peter and John have a problem. The beggar will not leave them; he clings to them, and as they move toward Solomon's Portico, the word of what took place ripples through the crowd, and everyone is running toward them to behold the proof of this miracle with their own eyes. But when they see the formerly lame man clinging to Simon Peter, they remember the burly Galilean fisherman as an intimate of Rabbi Jesus bar Joseph who was known for his anti-establishment teachings and healing powers. It appears to them that Peter has assumed the mantle of that prophet just as Elisha assumed the powers of Elijah, and they stand gazing at Peter in awe.

Peter knows he must do something about this, so he pushes through the crowd a little way to a place where he can step up onto a ledge. And he stands there, and he shouts:

"Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this? Why do you stare at us as though we have made this man walk by our own power or piety? I will tell you how this man walks: it is by the name of Jesus, the servant whom the God of our fathers raised up. You saw him heal lame men, yet you denied him when he stood before Pilate. You denied the Holy One, the Righteous One, and demanded that a criminal be set free instead. You granted life to a murderer and killed the Author of life. But God overturned your decision and raised him from the dead, and we have seen him alive and been with him and seen him ascend into heaven where he waits for the time of the restoring of all things to Israel as was foretold by the prophets. The times of refreshing must come from the presence of the Lord, and he will send the Christ appointed to you, who

is this very Jesus.

"Now, brothers, I know you acted in ignorance, as did your rulers. God foretold by the mouth of the prophets that his Christ would suffer, and now that it has been fulfilled, the time has come for us to repent: turn to Jesus our Christ so that your sins may be blotted out and the times of refreshing may come.

"But I must warn you that every soul who rejects Jesus Christ will lose his inheritance in Israel. For you are the sons of the prophets who foretold his coming and of the covenant God made with your fathers, namely that in their offspring all the families of the earth will be blessed. If you are not one with us in Christ, you will not be a blessing; and if you are not a blessing, you must be cast off."

By words similar to these and many others Peter and John taught the temple attendees. Soon people were coming in from all over the city to hear their preaching, and by evening about five thousand men had believed their testimony, repented, and received the Holy Spirit.

Meanwhile the priests and the captain of the temple had gone out and rounded up a company of Sadducees. Unlike Pharisees, Sadducees were dead set against the supernatural and opposed anyone who believed in resurrection from death. An army of enraged Sadducees led by the priests and the temple guard stormed the place where Peter and John were preaching. They broke up the congregation, forcing everyone to leave the temple area; and they arrested Peter and John and the man who had been healed, leaving them in the custody of the temple guard while a meeting of the rulers of Israel was arranged for the next day.

These leaders had dealt with miracles before. In their minds, hardened by repeated denials of the authority demonstrated by Jesus, this was just another disruption to be quieted by whatever force was necessary. When the man born lame walked in and stood before them it was an irrefutable—or as they said, a "notable"—sign that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and was not dead. But to accept the apostle's testimony and bow in repentance to the accusations of Peter was out of the question.

Whether they realized it or not, the leaders in Israel faced a new thing: the Spirit of God had come to indwell believers and he was causing their behavior to be much different; they were not easily put off and frightened into denying their Savior as they had been before—and there were so many of them. It was the size of this company which had started with one beggar praising God and quickly grown to be numbered in the thousands that gave them pause. Hence the authorities refrained from punishing Peter and John on this occasion. And the man born lame, who had been the cause of it all, was beyond their reach. What could they accuse him of?

Little did the rejoicing citizens know that what did *not* happen when their leaders met together that day would have brought the time of refreshing within their lifetimes. Instead, many of them died horrible deaths, and the rest would never return to Jerusalem.

Essentially the same thing had happened six hundred years earlier when Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed the city and the temple. At that time the leaders believed God would not allow his holy city to be destroyed even though the prophets warned them of it—because the prophets also foretold that the time of refreshing would come and Messiah would defeat their enemies. But Messiah did not come to save them from that intense tribulation, for they still had not repented of their idolatry.

When the Romans leveled Jerusalem in 70 AD, the leaders were wrong again. Their Savior had come and they had rejected him not once but twice: first they had him killed, which God intended as a sacrifice for their sins. But they could not humble themselves to accept that, so when the day of decision came and a formerly lame beggar stood to convince them that salvation was in the name of Jesus they could not admit the terrible mistake they had made in order to accept forgiveness. Instead they relied on their own righteousness. It was true that they no longer practiced idolatry as the pagans did. But they had not gotten beyond worshipping to the letter of the Law.

Ever since the time of David and Solomon, the leaders of Israel have been a step behind the prophets. They missed the Spirit of Christ in Jesus, so they continue to wait for another Messiah. And they will wait until they come to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is who he said he was and they pray for forgiveness and invite him back. That day will come, but not without Jerusalem being destroyed once more. After incalculable suffering, the children of Israel will come to embrace the faith they have given to all the peoples of the world.

