

Are You Ready? – The Surprising Beginning to Preparation

Acts 3:19-20 | Sunday, March 3, 2019 | By Brian Brookins

ARE YOU READY?

THE SURPRISING BEGINNING TO PREPARATION

Acts 3:19-20

Our focus is going to be Acts 3:19-20. I want to read those two verses, then I'd like to go back and read a larger section, but let's start by focusing on this call to repentance. **“Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus.”** These two verses are coming as part of a story that begins in verse 1. Let's go back to verse 1, where we read:

Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour (this was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon). And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple.

So there was a man at this gate. It's called the Beautiful Gate. This is a meaningful reference for my family because we have two boys adopted from Africa. They were in a ministry center in Africa that was called The Beautiful Gate. We went to that ministry center a number of times, even as a church, over a long history. And there were quite a number of physically challenged children in this ministry center called The Beautiful Gate. So I see this picture of the lame man, as scripture describes him. Peter and John come upon him as he sits at the temple gate. By way of reference, we are told later in the story that he was over 40 years old and that he had been lame from birth.

Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. And Peter directed his gaze 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 and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God, and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

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So we have this marvelous healing story. There is so much here that we don't really have time to go into. "Silver and gold have I none." This is a picture of true spiritual power. We invest so much in the power of money and our hearts, even in ways that we're not aware of, are drawn to that. But we see that these are apostles: "Got no money, but I'm going to heal you." That's powerful, right?

Verse 11: "While he clung to Peter and John..." Forty years lame and he's leaping and praising God. I sit on the sofa for too long and have trouble getting up. I have trouble walking across the room. God has done a miracle of restoration in this man's life. Understandably, he's clinging to Peter and John. He is overwhelmed emotionally.

While he clung to Peter and John, all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's. And when Peter saw it he addressed the people: "Men of Israel, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we have made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And his name—by faith in his name—has made this man strong whom you see and know, and the faith that is through Jesus has given the man this perfect health in the presence of you all.

And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.' And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness.

Chapter 4, just one or two verses here: "And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead." Then he continues on through all of chapter 4, building this account, saying 5,000 men as a metric for measuring, which probably represented about at least 20,000 people, had already come to faith in

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Jesus in Jerusalem.

You see here something that's very important for us on the topic of preparation – a very surprising beginning. It is this word “repentance.” The doorway into everything that God has for you is repentance. The doorway into the restoration that God wants to bring in your life and in the world surprisingly starts with this idea.

That is really strange, because to the modern ear, to the modern mind, repentance is a devaluing word. It's a dehumanizing word. If I tell you, “Repent,” in the tone of Peter preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem that day, it would sound like I am just condemning you and accusing you. To our modern ear it is making us less human. That's what it sounds like.

In fact, the whole idea of sin biblically is something that we don't have space for to take seriously in our modern culture. If we talk about sin, it's either despised, like, “That's archaic, that's inappropriate, that's denying the goodness of mankind.” Or it's a joke. Chocolate desserts often have sin in them, right? “Oh, this is so good it's sinful!” We laugh. It's not a concept that we take seriously. But the Bible takes a very different position.

Let me illustrate to you from the Bible a couple ways that will help you see how repentance is the doorway. John the Baptist came to prepare for Jesus, for the coming of the kingdom. His entire ministry was one of preparation. That's prophesied in Isaiah 40. One is going to come and he's going to prepare the way. In typical prophetic fashion, he's going to level mountains. He's going to raise up valleys so that there's a level approach to receive what God's going to do.

In Matthew 3, John comes, fulfilling his ministry. We are told there that his message is: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Then this passage from Isaiah 40 is quoted right there. It's saying this is what he's doing. His message is one of repentance and this is God preparing the way for the Messiah. Then what did John do? He baptized people. His ministry act was the symbolic cleansing of washing, of baptism. That's why in the Christian life we begin with baptism.

Some of you here have followed Christ in faith, but you've not followed him in baptism. I want to encourage you: No, no, no, that's the first step. That's what God calls you to do. There are all kinds of reasons why we don't do that. Jesse does baptism, one of our elders. Maybe you're scared of Jesse. That's an understandable reason, but you still need to be baptized. If that's your reason, come see me. I'll baptize you. We'll do something else. Love you, Jesse.

Okay, I don't want to pressure you, but I've known people who've never taken that step. They've got reasons. Then one day they say, “You know what? Jesus is my Savior. He's Lord of all. I'm just going to obey him. I'm going to trust him.” Then it's like dominos start falling down in their lives, because there is a shift. There is a turn that takes place in their hearts. **That's what repentance is. It's a turn. It's a reorientation. It's a new thinking.**

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Can I say it this way? **For you to receive what God has for you, you have to change your mind. You have to think differently. God wants to renew your thinking. God wants to come in and make new your pattern of thoughts, your beliefs, your convictions, your affections that are deeply rooted in your heart. That's a doorway to restoration, a surprising doorway, admittedly.**

Still building this case for repentance as the front door, Jesus comes in Matthew 4. He is baptized as a paradigm, as a pattern for us to follow. He is anointed with the Spirit. Then we are told, boom! – he begins his ministry. First words out of his mouth in Matthew 4:17: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Now, Peter is preaching to people. You know what, I know that it will probably help you if I give you this whole sermon in about 30 seconds. Are you ready? I'm not going to quit in 30 seconds. Don't get your hopes up. **The healing of this lame man is presented in this passage as a foretaste of the resurrection, as a foretaste of restoration. That's what miracles are. Miracles are these foreshadowings of God making everything new.**

You never see Jesus showing off, like, “You see that tree over there? Watch this: Boom!” Right? “I'm just going to burn it down.” “Oooh, wow! Do it again!”

People tried to get him to do that. That was at the heart of the temptations, where Satan tempted him. Sadly, this is sometimes the circus that we see in the larger world, where healers are doing things that are incongruent, inconsistent with the Spirit of our Lord.

It puts me personally in a position where I don't like the tone, but listen, **I believe God does miracles.** Here's the interesting thing. If you are a naturalist, maybe naturalism would say science has disproven miracles and the miracles of the Bible didn't happen because science has proven it. I would challenge that thinking in a couple ways and say:

1. Science is only able to test the material. It's not designed, it's not capable of testing the non-material, the spiritual. So to say science only tests the material and has proven that the spiritual doesn't exist is incompatible because it's not able to test something that's not natural.
2. Secondly, if it feels like a miracle is a violation of nature, scripture presents it actually as a fulfillment of what nature should be, and once was, and will be again. In reality, a biblical miracle, when you see it, is an invitation to hope in the restoration that your heart longs for. It's this foreshadowing.

Two or three months ago, I preached on this topic. I don't really remember the message. I forget my own sermons, I'm sorry. It was about the miraculous, and a sign showed up in the mail, no identification: “There will be miracles.” It was a cool sign. I'm like, “Who sent this?” We couldn't find out, so we said, “God is sending us signs! This is great!” Then a

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couple weeks later someone told us, “Hey, I sent you this sign.” But thank you, because we believe that it did come from the Lord. It’s hanging in my office right now.

I want to make this case for you, if I can, that **Jesus was very purposeful in his miracles, because he wanted to give these signposts to the resurrection and to the restoration that is in Christ. It’s the work of the Holy Spirit. God wants to do impossible things in your life.** It is not like you may have been told, that everything you ask for you’re going to get. If I could say this, in my opinion (I’m going to step into a place where I’m talking to you about my opinion) it’s very foolish to go back and recreate biblical models, biblical miracles. Like, Jesus spit in dirt and created mud and put it on someone’s eye. Don’t do that. Don’t walk up to some stranger in the grocery store and spit. Not a good idea, for a number of reasons.

But I think many times the way God works today in our lives...you have to understand if you can step into this model where Jesus is saying to first century people: “Hey, put your hope in me and everything will be restored.” In the 21st century, that’s not going to always look the same. But it’s still going to be this like, “Boom! God is here! God is doing unbelievable, impossible things in me and through me in a way that doesn’t draw attention to me and isn’t him just showing off.” The heart of mankind is that we need repentance! We need to turn! **We are going the wrong direction, and in order to really experience what God has for us, we have to turn.**

He really presents it here as a coming home, coming back to God: Repent and turn again. He is calling a people back to home, to God. It’s a powerful image.

We started by talking about how repentance can be hard for the modern ear to grab ahold of. There is some truth in that, if I can be honest. There is a kind of repentance that is really unhealthy. 2 Corinthians 7 actually talks about this. The Apostle Paul commends the Corinthians. He said, “You really repented. You had a godly grief that led to true repentance.” He teaches in this little section in 2 Corinthians 7 that there is a kind of repentance that isn’t fueled by godly grief. It leads not to life, but to death and to regret.

It looks, I think, a little bit like this. It’s self-hate, self-condemnation, self-accusation. “I’ve got to repent. I’ve got to do better.” It just goes deeper and deeper and deeper into this hole, and it is dehumanizing. The reason is it has “me” at the center.

Now, repentance is not just that I did something wrong, but that I’ve broken with God. That’s why I have to turn. If you see a member of the opposite sex and look lustfully at that person, you can confess that sin, but if it’s just a fear of the consequences, and a regret that, “My wife’s going to kill me,” that kind of thinking gets darker and darker -- fear and anxiety and me, me, me, me, me.

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But there's a whole different pattern of thinking that says, "That person is made in the image of God. I'm made in the image of God. There are so many things wrong with this lust and this perspective." You can only get healed when God comes in and he brings this awareness. "Listen, come home! Come to me! I've got more for you in my kingdom, where I'm at the center and you're not."

If I'm driving down the road and someone cuts me off and I get angry and I'm running late and I'm lost and I don't know where I'm going... Did you just laugh? This sounds to my wife like a true story! "Oh, this just happened!" Sin in my life historically would look like me in this moment. I'm really embarrassed to tell you how angry I can get in those moments, like ballistic angry. Now, by God's grace, I hope that doesn't quite have the same hold on my life that it once did. But it scares me, that in the right circumstances I could revert. Some of you are like, "Man, he's got no business being a pastor." If you only knew.

Now, one of the things I've always hated, more than anything else, is to be late. At times it has led to anger, like really angry. "I'm lost and I can't figure this out!" Then there will be self-hate, then this whole dysfunction. Listen to me, this is important. Because I can go home that day and say, "God, forgive me! I yelled, I screamed. I said things I shouldn't have said. Forgive me." I suddenly feel the need to qualify this and tell you I don't flip people off. I don't shoot people. I don't roll down the window, alright? But it's sinful. I can confess that sin up here, right? But that's not really the sin, is it?

We were talking this week, some of us in a retreat with other pastors, about confessing the sin under the sin. If I start to go down a layer I say, "I'm fearful of what people are going to think about me because I'm late." Honestly, it took me years to be able to just say out loud, "I'm bad at directions." I feel like I'm in a 12-step group. "Hi, my name is Brian, and I'm bad at directions." I denied that because in my mind I had this false sense of masculinity that real men know how to get from one place to another. Well, this real man doesn't! Right?

I apologize, because this is a personal illustration. I don't know how else to make it, so let me just finish, because I don't want you to go home troubled for me. The layers on this thing. I'm newly married, going out of the neighborhood. My wife tells me, "Don't turn here, turn here." I get mad. All this comes up. Why? "Because you're saying I'm not a real man!" "I'm not saying you're not a real man! Go right, not left, you knucklehead!" Right? That's the depth of my need for restoration.

Until I'm willing...and God does this! His grace comes in and says, "Brian, you don't want to do this. You don't want to admit this. You don't want to see that down below your fear of what other people think is this pride that you want to be exalted, you want to look great. You want to be God." And when you start to confess the sin under the sin under the sin, if you don't have the hope of the cross, you will die. You will say, "I'm a mess and there is no hope for me."

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Jesus stands before you and says, “You know what? You are actually a bigger mess than you think you are. And I know, because I know you perfectly and I paid for it all! Just turn and come home!” When you do that, it’s not like you have this perfect knowledge or this great ability to walk it out. You do it so imperfectly, but God just heaps grace upon you, I mean literally dumps it on you. He gives grace to the humble. He gives grace to the broken.

Repentance is the doorway into everything God has for you. It seems like it’s something that’s going to make you less human. No, no, no, no, no. In fact, if you come to a good, good Spirit-filled, Spirit-led prayer meeting, if this reorientation doesn’t happen, you’ll be like, “Oh, I don’t know...people crying out to God. They are confessing sin. They are broken. They are talking about their need.” You’ll be uncomfortable. You’ll be uncomfortable in a setting where people really worship God. I’m not talking about a form or a style or something that’s subjective.

I have to apologize because I didn’t even give you my outline for this passage. I would fail preaching class today for sure. I’m going to give you the outline and close this message.

There are three rewards for repentance: Cleansing. “I’ll blot out your sin.” It’s like a hot bath at the end of the day. “Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out.” Second promise: Refreshing. “That times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” Third: Hope or restoration. “That he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus.” Christ coming back and completing restoration.

I’m going to give them like this:

- I. **Cleansing.**
- II. **Refreshing,**
- III. **Restoration.**

Give me two more minutes and we’ll finish. It looks like Luke, who is writing this, is chronologically confused. You are reading this and saying, “Okay, are these benefits mine now or when Jesus comes back?” It’s kind of like he’s folding it all into these two verses. And his answer is: Yes. It is now, and yes, it is when Jesus comes back.

When we repent, when we turn from self to God, from sin to God, there is a cleansing, there is a refreshing, and there is a restoration, but all of that is awaiting a full completion when Jesus returns. We are realizing it now. In real-time we are experiencing it, and the Spirit of God is at work in our lives. There will be miracles. But there will also be suffering.

We experience God’s presence in the churn of all of that and we are constantly walking through this doorway of

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repentance, experiencing refreshing, renewal, restoration, the promise of restoration here and more to come later.

Martin Luther hung his 95 theses on the door and #1 actually quotes Matthew 4:17: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” He was challenging the Catholic Church about selling indulgences. He said, “Listen, when Jesus told us to repent, he meant that we would always be repenting, that this is just part of our life in him.” We are constantly saying, “Okay, Lord, there is this sin in my life and it means I’m oriented in the wrong way. I’m turning. I’m turning. God is fueling this with his grace, his presence, his help.”

We are going to close, and I want to invite you into a season of repentance, of cleansing in the Lord. It’s a doorway to restoration in your life. Amen? I pray that you will still get in a car with me after today’s message, and that your real takeaway will be: Alright, this is a doorway. This is actually a blessing. There are rewards to this promise.

In a moment Adam is going to come and lead us. Can I just say, some of you have asked questions about the way we are ending the service. We sing the Doxology and we do a benediction. I asked for that and I did it for two reasons:

- 1) I had a simple experience in the Lord where I was reading about the Lord’s Supper, about communion, and I was really struck by the fact that Jesus, after he celebrated the Passover with his apostles and instituted the Lord’s Supper, that before leaving, before going out, they sang a hymn together. I felt like there is something wonderful that happens when the people of God close with our voices lifted to God in song. It’s beautiful. It doesn’t represent a big shift in theology. Don’t read too much into it except that we are just trying to be the people that God wants us to be.
- 2) Secondly, Paul often closes his letters out with a benediction. There is power in the spoken word and we do biblical benedictions. We want to pronounce biblical blessings so that you will go out strengthened even more as you connect your faith tomorrow to what you’ve experienced today. Amen?