

12 May 2024

My Dear Theophilus: The Power and the Glory

Acts 1-4

My dear Theophilus,

It has been some time since I last wrote you, telling you the story of the Jesus that I serve, so I was glad to get the letter from you saying that you were still thinking about it. You might remember that I told you I had an idea for a sequel? Well, I've decided to write it, and as before, I plan to send it to you in installments. You see the reason I have become a follower of Jesus is not just what he did himself when he was on earth, but also what he does to the people he encounters. The letters that follow will be stories of how Jesus has changed – and continues to change – lives. Including mine.

In the days following that morning at the empty tomb, the risen Jesus appeared more than once to his disciples – I think I told you about his time with Cleopas and the other one whose name I've forgotten. After some days, he took them out to a nearby hill and told them that he would be leaving them. Then Jesus told them to stay in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them. “Do you have any questions about what that means?”

One raised his hand. “And when the Holy Spirit comes, is *that* when you'll drive out the Romans and re-establish the kingdom?”

Jesus sighed. It was a good thing he loved his disciples. “Let's leave the details to God, shall we? You just wait in Jerusalem. But I'll tell you this: when the Spirit comes, you will receive a new power, and you will go out as my witnesses, first in Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, and then to every last place on earth.” And having said this, he began to rise before their eyes until a cloud hid him from their view. The disciples stood there, gazing up at the clouds. They stood there for a long time. At last, two men in white robes appeared in their midst.

“What are you looking at?” one of the men asked.

“Jesus. He just rose into the sky.”

“Huh. So how long are you going to stand here looking up for him?”

“I don't know.”

“I see. Is that what he told you to do?”

“No, he said to go to Jerusalem and wait for someone.”

“Here's a thought: why don't you do that?”

Eventually the disciples stopped staring up at the heavens, went down the hill, and gathered in an upstairs room in Jerusalem. While they were there, sort of lying low on account of the people who had killed Jesus still being in power, Peter rose to his feet one day during a prayer meeting and said, “My friends, I have been thinking about what we should do next.”

Peter had always been a leader. The others waited eagerly for his insight. He said, “Well, you know how Judas is no longer one of the Twelve, since he betrayed Jesus. Well, that leaves us

an empty position. I think we need to conduct a search, interview candidates, and appoint someone to be the twelfth disciple.”

The rest were pleased to have something to do, so they acted at once. They appointed an ad hoc search committee with instructions to report back to the full discipleship in a week. The committee returned with two qualified candidates, Matthias and Joseph Barsabbas. The board considered the best method of discerning God’s will for their twelfth disciple, but they eventually settled on an appropriate method, threw dice, and selected Matthias. In this way, they rounded out their numbers to the glory of God.

Having no other ideas, though, they continued waiting in Jerusalem, praying. They were still there when the next Jewish festival arrived – the Feast of Weeks. This festival comes seven weeks after Passover, or forty-nine days, and on the fiftieth day Jewish pilgrims from around the world gathered to worship at the temple. That fiftieth day is called Pentecost. The disciples were praying that day when suddenly a great noise filled the room, like a storm. They looked up, shocked, and there appeared to be flames floating in the air above each of their heads, and into those heads a single idea began to form: “Why are we hidden away in this room? We should be out there!” They tumbled out into the streets where pilgrims were already milling about, though it was early. Then another thought entered their minds: “We should tell these people about Jesus, about how he rose from the dead.”

And so they did. They started telling everyone that they met about the man who had changed their lives, the man who apparently was more than a man, because they had seen him risen from the grave. And here’s the strange thing. Although the crowds in the streets were from every land you could name, and many of them spoke different languages, they all heard the message of Christ’s resurrection in their own language. It was like the Tower of Babel, but backwards. Now God was drawing together the scattered peoples with their different languages and giving them one message. The people were amazed. “Who are these people who are speaking our own languages? And why are their faces shining?”

Someone shouted out, “They look like they’re drunk!” So Peter climbed up on a wall and spoke in a booming voice: “No, we’re not drunk with wine! It’s only nine in the morning!” The disciples had standards, you see. Peter went on, “What you’re seeing is what the prophet Joel promised so long ago. The Spirit of God has been poured out on all flesh; *your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the servants, both male and female, I will pour out my spirit in those days.* And why is this prophecy coming true now? Let me tell you. Some of you have heard about Jesus of Nazareth, about his teachings and his miracles, but he’s more than that. He is the Messiah, promised in the scriptures. Do you remember the psalm where David says, *you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption?* You ever wonder who David was talking about? Not himself; David died. We have his grave. He decayed like everyone else. No, he was talking about the Messiah – that the true Messiah wouldn’t overcome earthly kingdoms but would overcome death itself – and that’s what happened. You and your priests had Jesus killed, but he rose again, and we are witnesses of that resurrection!”

Someone called out, “So what should we do?”

Peter said, “Repent of your sins, be baptized, receive the forgiveness of Jesus the Messiah. That’s all.” And one by one people began to step forward to do what Peter had said. The disciples weren’t sure what to do at first, but they scrambled about and started baptizing.

Three thousand people joined the followers of Jesus that day. Many would return to their own countries, but some stayed, and the little band of frightened former disciples became a community of believers, meeting for prayer and meals and sharing everything with each other. The extraordinary power of that Pentecost stayed with the disciples, who performed many healings, and more people were being drawn to the new community every day.

But the new community was still a Jewish community. The followers of Jesus saw their mission as that of reforming the faith of their birth. They still held to the laws of the Torah and still worshiped in the temple. So it came about one day that Peter and John, the two acknowledged leaders of the movement, were going to their regular worship in the temple, when they met some men carrying a lame man to his usual begging spot outside the temple gate. It had to be outside, because the Torah prohibited people who were not physically whole from entering the holy place. Peter and John stopped before the man, who looked up at them hopefully. “Some copper coins, sirs?” Judging from their clothes, that was probably the most he could hope for.

“We have no money,” Peter said. The man sighed and looked to the next person. But Peter went on, “Here’s what I do have, though. In the name of Jesus, the Messiah, from Nazareth, stand up and walk.”

The man felt a sharp pain in his legs. Having never felt his legs at all, ever since birth, this was terrifying. The pain spread as muscles stretched and swelled. He moved his right leg. On purpose. He just decided to make it move, and it moved. That had never happened. He did it again. And again. He tried his left leg. He could feel the ground beneath them. His legs were alive. He looked up at Peter, his eyes wide and his mouth gaping. Peter offered his hand. “Come on,” he said. The lame man took his hand and felt himself being raised. He was used to being lifted in the air, but this time was different. He was being lifted to his feet. And then the hand let go, and he was still on his feet. The man looked down at his legs, afraid to move, afraid to fall, afraid to believe. Peter said, “Shall we walk together into the temple of God?”

And so they did. One step at a time, with Peter and John holding his arms and laughing together with him, he made his way for the first time in his life into the courts of the Lord. That courtyard was still, and a wide path had opened for them through the stunned crowd. Everyone was staring at the man in hushed silence.

Peter said, “Now what are you staring at? Didn’t you see what happened? This man has been made well by the name of Jesus. You remember Jesus. You and the priests rioted against him, handed him over to Pilate to be killed, but he didn’t stay dead. God raised him to life. Of this we are witnesses. And now you are witnesses, too, because the power that brought Jesus back to life has given this man back his legs.”

“Look!” the man said. “No hands!”

Peter went on. “And that same power can give you life as well. I know you didn’t know what you were doing when you called for Jesus’ crucifixion. Repent of your sins and receive his forgiveness. Everything we have received as Jews – Moses, Samuel, and the prophets – they were all leading to this moment. Believe in the name of Jesus.”

“Here now! What’s all this then?” came a new, imperious voice. Into the outer court swept a group of priests and temple guards. They had heard that someone was teaching in the temple. They saw Peter and John, poor men in rough clothes, and started to have the guards toss

them out. Really, where do these common laborers get the notion that they can teach? But then a voice caught their attention.

“Look! I can hop on one leg! Who wants to dance with me?”

And they saw the lame – formerly lame – man and realized there was more going on here. The crowd suddenly began shouting, “These men healed him!”

The priests changed their instructions. Instead of having the guards throw Peter and John out, they had them take the two into custody overnight. The next morning, with all the chief priests and priestly nobility gathered into council, they dragged Peter and John out of the cell and brought them before the most important men of Judaism. “Now then,” demanded the chief priest. “By what power did you do this miracle?”

Peter smiled. “I’m glad you asked. This man was healed by the power of Jesus of Nazareth, whom you had crucified, but who has risen from the dead. It was his name pronounced over this man that healed his legs, knit his sinews, restored him. It is that name that will restore all who believe in him. That is the name and the power and the glory that we proclaim. He is the one who was promised by the scriptures –”

“How dare you, illiterate peasants, try to teach us the scriptures!” the priests cried furiously. Peter and John were taken over to one side while the priests took counsel.

“What are we supposed to do now? I thought we’d heard the last of that Jesus. We can’t pretend nothing has happened – the man’s dancing with strangers in the streets. All Jerusalem is talking about it. And we can’t *punish* them for healing a man. That’s not a good look for us.” Finally, they called them back and the chief priest said, “All right. We’ll overlook this matter this time. You may go, on one condition. You must promise to talk no more about this Jesus.”

Peter looked around at the most important men in his world, the leaders of his faith, the preservers of God’s law, men he had been taught to revere since his birth. “We can’t do that, sir. We don’t just talk about Jesus because we feel like it. It is a command of God. *You will be my witnesses*. You tell me: should we obey you, or should we obey God?”

The priests glared at them threateningly. “You’ll regret it, if you keep talking about him!” But threats don’t work on people who have something worth dying for, something more powerful than fear, and in helpless futility, they let them go. Peter and John went out to find the community of the Risen Messiah gathered together, praying for them and waiting for God’s deliverance.

You see, Theophilus, the priests thought they could get rid of Jesus, put him out of mind forever, never hear his name again. But Jesus’ name is not so easily suppressed. But you’ve already noticed that, haven’t you? I’ll write more soon. Your friend, Luke.