

Time to Refresh (Acts 3:11-20)

8.8.21

This morning I'd like to start off with a little transparency. Most of the time, when I preach, I do so on topics I have some confidence in, or on passages that I feel my study and personal discipleship has blessed me with a certain level of understanding or expertise.

However, every now and then I come before you all on a Sunday morning and try to guide you in understanding truths that I am very much still in the process of understanding for myself. I want you to know that what I share with you today is fresh in my heart and still doing important work on my own soul.

Because I believe in the power of Scripture, and that the things I share with you are from God (and not just from me), I am not concerned about my lack of mastery over the things we'll look at together. But I thought it was fair and important for you to know that this morning I could just as easily be sitting beside you, learning along with you...so I ask for your grace as we receive this word from the Lord, together.

A few weeks ago Pastor Steve called me into his office to talk about the upcoming preaching schedule and my next assignment. He said I could simply pick any passage or topic I wanted to preach on. I asked if there was anything in particular he thought would be good for me to focus on or address.

Steve replied: "You can just preach from whatever you've found interesting lately. Pick something you feel passionate about."

To which I said, "Cool, sounds good, I can do that"...but even as I agreed, somewhere deep in my heart and soul, anxiety began to blossom. Because to be perfectly honest, lately I have not found much about my life, especially my spiritual life, particularly interesting, inspiring, or passionate.

In fact, I can sum up what I've been feeling in most any area of my life for the past few months with just one word:

Exhaustion.

I am, and have been for some time, tired...and I've not been able to figure out how to find some rest.

Part of my exhaustion is just the season of life that my family is in. Over the past few months we put an offer in on a house, made our way through the stressful home buying process, painted, prepped, cleaned, moved, and are now in the midst of unpacking boxes, setting up rooms, and figuring out fix the mysterious disappearance of the nearly all the electric power in the upstairs of our brand new 116 year old home.

Then of course there is the state of the world, a year-and-a-half of pandemic living, economic strain, political upheaval, the ugly reality of injustice...and the pressure that comes with trying to be a good follower of Jesus through all of this confusion, anger, and frustration.

Most days it feels like my "to do" list never seems to go from "to do" to "got done" before half a dozen tasks, events, commitments get added to the already expansive collection of things that demand my time, attention, and energy.

Perhaps you are familiar with this feeling. Perhaps some of you feel a tremendous kinship with me when I recite what seems to be the cultural mantra of our time: "I am tired...but I've got to keep on going."

Pressing like this, further into exhaustion for the sake of “getting things done”, has a price. Something must pay, must be sacrificed, for the cost of what I perceive as progress. And for me, the one currency I always seem to spend to the point of bankruptcy is my spiritual life.

My time with God, giving Him my attention and devotion, speaking to and hearing from Him in prayer, reading His word, enjoying His presence and discerning His activity in my life...I confess that all too often I cut these things loose in order to do and keep up with anything and everything else.. I still have my faith, but I assume God will just approve of and sanctify everything that I’m doing, and that we can catch up later when it’s more convenient for me to slow down.

All of this was going on in my head and my heart when Steve said, “Just preach on something you’ve been passionate about lately.”

But the truth is, I feel too distracted, too tired, and too exhausted to care too deeply about the things of God. Which is an embarrassing thing to admit as a Christian, let alone a pastor, but it’s the plain truth. At that moment I felt completely depleted and needed to find a way to refresh.

So, I did what any theologically trained, professional minister, spiritually mature person would do to find the answer I needed to reclaim my passions and find some rest:

I googled, “*Bible passages on refreshing.*”

(Slick, eh? Y’all thought I was good at my job, when really I’m just another millennial who is really good at googling.)

And that’s how I ended in Acts 3. Where I read, for probably the 50th time in my life, the story of how Peter and John once healed a crippled man just outside the temple gates, causing a big commotion, and giving them a chance to preach the Gospel to an awed and astounded audience. But for the first time in my life, 3:19-20 jumped off the page and drove deep into my weary, worn out heart:

*19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, **that times of refreshing** may come from the Lord, 20 and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.*

Acts 3 (NIV)

You know how sometimes when you’re out at a restaurant and they walk by with one of those sizzling pans, delivering some kind of delicious dish to another dinner patron, and you think to yourself “ooooooh, I want that now.”

That’s how I felt when I read v.19. I want that. Now. Whatever it means to have “*times of refreshing*”, I want that.

And maybe, if you’re like me and feel exhausted, tired, weary, worn down, distant from the Lord, and disconnected from your relationship with Him...maybe you want these “times of refreshing” too.

The good news is, they are a gift from God, and God loves to give all He has freely and generously. The catch is that the refreshment, rest, and renewal don’t come in the ways you might think. It’s not ultimately about going on a retreat, binging your favorite TV show, or invoking the right sequence of self-help steps.

Instead, it will involve **repenting** from our wrongs, **receiving** what God has to give, and experiencing **refreshment** from its truest, purest source...God himself.

Stick with me, my weary friends. We can find some rest together.

Acts 3 begins with Peter and John -- followers of Jesus and leaders during the earliest days of the Church and Christainity -- encountering a man who had been crippled from birth. This man had stationed himself near one of the gates to the Jewish Temple so he could beg for the money from those on their way to and from worship.

Instead of handing the man a bit of silver or gold, Peter and John do something surprising: in the name of Jesus Christ, they tell the man to get up and walk. And incredibly...that's exactly what he does. The power of Jesus miraculously heals this man, and the three of them enter the temple together, walking, jumping, and praising God for such a wonderful gift.

The event attracts a lot of attention, as people begin to recognize the man as the same one who had been coming to the gates of the temple to beg all his life. Wonder and amazement fills the gathering crowd, and they stare, astonished, at Peter and John. They wonder, "Who are these men with such incredible power? How do we get what they have to give?!" In 3:11-12, we see that Peter realizes the error they are all about to make and immediately corrects their course.

12 When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? 13 The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. 14 You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. 15 You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. 16 By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

Acts 3

Peter declares a couple things in this passage that will be important for us to remember when we get to his promise in vv19-20 about the "times of refreshing".

First, he deflects the attention of his astonished onlookers away from himself, back to where their adoration and intrigue belong: with God the Father and with the now glorified, resurrected, holy and righteous Jesus. Peter believed it was imperative that we get this right: **restoration comes from God**. Human beings might be involved, we might be blessed to participate, but the source of this amazing grace is not our own works or power, but is instead the mighty works and awesome power of God.

Second, Peter wanted these people to know, to see, to understand, and to feel the weight and implications of the fact that, when it comes to Jesus, and who he is, and who they are in relation to him...they had been gravely mistaken. Tragically, sinfully, rebelliously, wrong. They were so wrapped up in the world, in what they assumed was true about themselves and about God, what they'd heard from others, and what the court of majority opinion and decided about Jesus...that they "disowned the Holy and Righteous One...asked that a murderer be released [instead of Jesus]...[and] killed the author of life."

Now, the beauty of the Gospel, of the Good News Jesus Christ, is that **God's got plans that cannot be stopped by our misplaced affections or disastrous, sinful assumptions**. God raised Jesus from the dead. The very name of Jesus is now an invocation of power and strength. Faith in Jesus is something that brings about transformation that the world cannot comprehend.

But the disobedience and error Peter speaks to in vv11-16 echo in our own lives today.

Our attention is too often drawn away from Jesus and given to the people or the things or the tasks or the powers around us.

Our understanding of who Jesus is and what he is doing even now gets twisted and warped until we somehow put ourselves in the place of telling God how things are going to be.

We want to be the ones calling the shots before the Holy and Righteous One. This happens to non believers and believers alike. Non believers simply continue to dismiss and disown him. Believers, meanwhile, all too often slip into the delusion of trying to control Jesus, of telling the author of life what is going to happen in our lives, right down to what we're going to do today.

Last week I began to realize that's exactly what I've been doing for the past few months. I've been telling God my plans and assuming He'd just come along for the ride. I've been telling Jesus that I am the lord of my own life, and if he wanted to be my friendly, benevolent advisor, well, that would be okay.

Y'all I am too small, too finite, too petty, too sinful, too powerless, too broken to be the lord of my own life. I need the one who God raised from the dead to save me from myself. We all need the holy, righteous, incomparably wondrous Jesus to be the rightful receiver of our adoration, to be our guide, to be our Lord and King.

And, God be praised, that is exactly the sort of thing He promises to do.

This past week my weary and wayward spirit hung ragged but tightly on Peter's next words:

17 "Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. 18 But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. 19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, 20 and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.

Acts 3

Peter acknowledges that the people were not fully aware of what they were doing, or the choices they were making, when they rejected Jesus and demanded his execution. But he also does not say that their ignorance saves them from their guilt. (The same goes for us)

Whether our sins come from ignorance or willing disobedience, there has always only ever been one source of salvation: the sacrificial suffering of the Son of God, Jesus the promised Messiah. This is the promise spoken of by the prophets of Old Israel:

4 Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53

The Lord has laid the iniquity -- the wickedness, the sin, the gross injustice, the audacity -- of our all too often habit, obsession, twisted desire of turning away from God...He has laid that on Jesus to suffer, and bear, and overcome on our behalf.

And what is left to us, what is given to us, what is unbelievably yet assuredly offered to us...is the promise of peace. A way of reconciliation with our God. The work is already done. The price already paid. All we need do is follow Peter's instructions in vv19-20:

19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, 20 and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.

Acts 3 (NIV)

Repent. Receive. Refresh.

Repentance being the first step on this list toward “times of refreshing” hit me pretty hard this week. I don’t often think of repenting as a way of establishing peace. I’m much more likely to think of good books, long naps, walks in the park, and most of all...I think of the wonderful bliss of doing...nothing.

But calling for repentance as a first step toward peace reveals something that I believe is often forgotten or overlooked about the anxiousness, confusion, hardship, or pain of our lives: all of it often caused by sin. The root of our peacelessness is our godlessness. And so if we want to take part in God’s times of refreshing...we must first come to honest terms with our disobedience.

To repent, we must call out our sin, be truthful about what it is, and commit ourselves to a change that turns us back to the Lord. We don't surround our sins with spin or seek to minimize it with excuses. We confess, chiefly to God but also to others, what we have done wrong. We open ourselves to accountability with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We humble ourselves, we correct our wrongs, and we answer for any pain or suffering we may have caused, even at great cost or consequence to ourselves.

For many, repentance will be the hardest step on the journey toward “times of refreshing”. It demands the most of us. And it doesn’t always come all at once. I spent a lot of time, over the span of several days last week, trying to discern what exactly had gone wrong in my life to make me so distant and disconnected from God. And to be honest, I’m still diagnosing this problem. But the Lord has been gracious enough to assure me that I am on the right track. That surrendering things like my busyness, success, filled-to-the-brim days, and cheap, lifeless relaxation/numbing tactics are going to make space for the thing I really, truly desire most deep in my soul: time with Him. Closeness with God. The peace of His presence.

The question I would ask all of you who, like me, are weary and worn out is this: What in your life has drawn your attention away from the Lord? In what ways have you altered your understanding of who He is that has wrongfully and rebelliously placed the Lord of Life in service to you, instead of you in service to Him?

Identifying these things might be hard. It might hurt. The cost of turning away from them in order to turn back to God might seem too great.

But trust me, *it will be worth it*, because of what comes next.

Receiving the forgiveness of God.

19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out...

Acts 3 (NIV)

The word Peter uses for “wiped out” was one often used to describe the process of washing ink off of papyri, or the paper, in the 1st century. The ink didn’t sink in and become part of the paper...it remained on the surface, and therefore could be removed, erased, and obliterated. The parchment could be made clean again, ready to take on a new message.

This is what God offers to you in relation to your sin. He can remove it. Your actions have not permanently altered your being. The forgiveness offered through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ can wash you clean of your marks and prepare you to carry the words of God's new story for your life.

This is something God does for you. Your action, your effort, your strength, your power is not required. Be thankful for that, because otherwise you would fail. What is required of you is this: you have to believe it. You have to *trust* that God really does want to forgive you. To wipe clean your soul. To make you ready to be something, and someone, more than you were when you were a slave to your sin.

So here I'd simply ask: do you believe you are forgiven? That the work of God has made you something and someone new?

It can be surprisingly hard to accept that God has forgiven you. Sometimes I think about how long I've been gone, been away from him, strove for a life that put Him to the side or diminished His voice or ignored His commands and wonder...can God really want to make a way for me to come back? Can He really wipe away my wrongs and allow me to start fresh again?

Remember that in our passage Peter offered this promise, this Gift of God, to people who he had just accused of participating in the murder of the Son of God. Their voices, just a few days before this, had been shouting in anger and demanding violence against the innocent Lord of Life.

And to these people, forgiveness was offered. To these people, a life restored to a loving relationship with God is made possible through the power of faith in His resurrected Son.

Like these people, our rebellion can be resolved. Our anger can be eased. Our sins can be forgiven. Our mistakes don't have to define us.

I am not defined by my exhaustion or the things that led to it. I am not defined by all that I did, or accomplished, or failed to do, or by moving God to the background of my life.

I am defined by His forgiveness. And by that amazing grace, I am led into his *presence*. ***And that presence is, finally, where I experience the times of refreshing I so desperately seek.***

If you were to look back through this passage, you'd see that time and time again, Peter urged people to shift their focus to Jesus and move toward Him. Toward admiring Him, embracing Him, believing Him, longing for Him, and even waiting for His eventual, promised return.

There is a reason for this hyper-focus on the presence of Christ: ***He is the refreshment we long for. He is the rest we need. He is the peace our souls are searching for.***

Throughout all of Scripture, God is constantly offering peace and rest and renewal to the human race. To those who follow Him. Because He knows how badly we need it. He knows our sin depletes us. He knows our worst habit, our wandering from Him, makes us weary and weak.

And so time and time again, the promise of refreshment is not the promise of a thing or activity...it is the promise of being in His glorious presence.

28 Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. 29 He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. 30 Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; 31 but those who hope in the

Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Isaiah 40 (NIV)

28 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11 (NIV)

When I was little I used to stay with my dad after church services ended to help cleanup the building we rented on Sundays for worship. One time, as I wandered through the hallways, I got lost and for a short while stuck in a stairwell (that, truth be told, I’m pretty sure I wasn’t supposed to be in). I eventually found a way out (I uh...just needed to push on a door I had been pulling), and got back to some more familiar parts of the building, but being free didn’t actually bring me any peace. I didn’t feel safe or comforted until I saw my dad again. Only then, in his presence, was I sure that I was going to be okay.

The times of refreshing the Bible promises, that God promises, have nothing to do with finding a better way to relax, or finding our own way out of a tough situation. True refreshment comes from being in the presence of God. It comes from intimate, meaningful, quality time spent with Jesus.

You and I were made to be with God. Our longing for Him is embedded in our souls. True peace cannot be found apart from Him. We will never be satisfied with the “rest” this world can offer. Don’t get me wrong: it’s okay to enjoy the world around us, in appropriate ways, when we can. Take vacations. Watch hilarious movies. Get delicious tacos with your friends. Read a good book. Fall asleep as you pretend to read a good book. Take care of yourself.

But do not make the mistake of so devoting your attention and your affection to these little, temporary, finite things...that you fail to give the greater parts of yourself, your time, and your love to God. Spend time in the Word. Spend time in prayer. Spend time walking and talking with God as He is your friend, your King, and your Savior. Spend time figuring out what best works for you to experience His presence...and then throw yourself into that wonderful connection...every single day.

Times of refreshing come from times with the Lord. There is no substitute. There is nothing sweeter. There is nothing more life-giving than being in the presence of the Lord of Life.

And so my final question for you is this: When was the last time you felt like you spent quality time in the presence of the Lord?

If you, like me, feel as if the answer might be “I’m really not when I last felt like that”...it’s okay. God hasn’t gone anywhere. We’ve just become too distracted and wandered off too far.

So let’s all, together, seek the presence of the Lord as we worship though this final song:

*I will lean back in the loving arms
Of a beautiful Father
Breathe deep and know that He is good
He’s a love like no other*