

Acts 2

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In my work as a preacher, it's important to me to be as responsive to the congregation as I can. This means, among other things, that anytime a member suggests that I preach on a particular topic, I do my best to accomplish that. I recently received one such suggestion in the surveys that the brethren here submitted last month. This particular commenter asked me to preach several first-principles sermons from the book of Acts. To be quite honest, if I weren't willing to do that, I don't think I would deserve to be called a preacher of the gospel. Over the next several months, then, we're going to have several studies based on the great gospel sermons of Acts. This begins, of course, with Acts 2.

The Day of Pentecost

The second chapter of the book of Acts divides logically into three main sections. The first of these addresses the strange occurrences on the day of Pentecost, 50 days after the death of Jesus on the cross. Their story begins with **THE BAPTISM OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**. This is described in Acts 2:1-4. Before we go any further, let's take note of the subjects of this story. The "they" of v. 1 grammatically refers back to the last verse of Acts 1, which is about Matthias being added to the other 11 apostles. From this, we can conclude that the Holy Spirit was poured out not upon all 120 people who believed in Jesus at that time, but only upon the 12 apostles.

This makes perfect sense. After all, in the first part of Acts 1, Jesus before His ascension promises His apostles, and only His apostles, that they will receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This baptism of the Holy Spirit doesn't have anything to do with saving the apostles; instead, Jesus explains in v. 8 that the power the Holy Spirit will impart to them will enable them to be His witnesses, to carry His gospel to the remotest parts of the earth. Acts 2, where the Holy Spirit comes upon the apostles and causes them to speak in tongues, is Jesus fulfilling His promise to the apostles and equipping them so that they can carry out Step One of His gospel plan.

Next, we learn about **THE AUDIENCE** of the sermon that is about to be preached. Luke describes it and its reaction in Acts 2:5-13. At this time, it was the custom of devout Jews from all over the world to make a yearly trek to Jerusalem so that they could celebrate the Passover there. Then, they would remain in Jerusalem for 50 days, until the festival of Pentecost, when they would go home. This is why Peter's audience has people from all over the Roman Empire and beyond in it. They were packing up to leave when they heard the wind and came to see what was happening.

This is important for two main reasons. First of all, it means that Peter is not speaking to a friendly crowd. These are people who believe in God, but they don't yet believe in Jesus. They are not predisposed to believe that Peter and the other apostles are performing a miracle. In fact, some of them go so far as to reject the evidence of their ears and question the apostles' sobriety. The rest, though, are listening to Peter, but only because of what they are hearing. When these disinterested listeners affirm that a miracle is taking place, they give us good reason to believe them.

Second, because these Jews have come to Jerusalem from all over the world, they are uniquely equipped to define for us what the first-century spiritual gift of speaking in tongues was. They didn't hear the apostles babbling in a so-called prayer language or speaking what the apostles claimed was the language of angels. Instead, they heard these men, whom they identified as backwoods Galileans by their manner of dress, speaking the languages of all the foreign countries where these Jews lived, languages that Galileans from the sticks would never have had the opportunity to learn.

This is what the first-century gift of speaking in tongues did. It gave its possessors the ability to speak in foreign languages, which would have been phenomenally useful to those early gospel preachers. There are all kinds of people today who claim to speak in tongues, but none of them are able to produce more than babble. They may sincerely believe that they possess the gift of tongues, but the evidence of the Scripture proves that they do not.

As we see, this audience of devout Jews is perplexed by what's occurring. Peter begins **HIS EXPLANATION** to them in Acts 2:14-21. Peter first dismisses the accusations of drunkenness, then moves on to what he really wants to talk about—a prophecy from the Old Testament book of Joel. We already saw in v. 4 that the apostles' speaking in tongues was caused by the Holy Spirit. In v. 16, Peter lets his audience in on this secret. The manifestation of foreign languages that the Jews can't explain was caused by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that Joel predicted.

However, God did not pour forth of His Spirit just to give the Jewish travelers something interesting to discuss on their way home from Jerusalem. Instead, this miraculous outbreak was the sign of something even more important—that the time had come when everyone who called on the name of the Lord would be saved. If you like to write in your Bible, be sure to underline or highlight or whatever Acts 2:21. Everything else that Peter says in the rest of his sermon is about this verse. He first explains who the Lord is, and then what "everyone" must do to call on His name.

Who Is The Lord?

The next section of Acts 2, and indeed the bulk of Peter's sermon, provides his answer to the question of who the Lord is. Peter begins with his answer to the question, none other than **JESUS OF NAZARETH**. He gives a

thumbnail sketch of the life of Jesus in Acts 2:22-24. Half of this context repeats things Peter's audience already knew; the other half explains things they didn't know. Let's take the repeated stuff first. Here, Peter reminds these Jews of what they had seen from Jesus—first, that Jesus was a genuine prophet. At this time, it was a matter of public knowledge that Jesus worked miracles that only a man sent by God could perform. Even Jesus' enemies at the time admitted this, which gives us little room to be skeptical about the miracles of Jesus today. Second, Jesus was seized by His enemies, handed over to the Romans, and crucified. This had happened less than two months ago, and all the Jews would have known it.

This presented the Jews with an apparently serious contradiction. They believed that God always rewarded the good with earthly blessing, and only the unrighteous experienced misfortune. Jesus, by contrast, seemed to be favored by God, yet died an ignominious death. Peter resolves this contradiction with two arguments. First, God's righteous Servant Jesus died because that was always God's plan for Him. However, this didn't make God unjust. Instead, even though God allowed Jesus to suffer in this way, He rescued Him by raising Him from the dead.

These are two things that the Jews would NOT have heard before, and it's going to be hard for Peter to persuade them that they are true. In order for the Jews to accept his argument, they have to revise their understanding of how God deals with the righteous. Above all, though, they're going to have to accept that Jesus was raised from the dead.

In support of this key point, the resurrection of Jesus, Peter goes on to provide three witnesses, three reasons to believe that the resurrection happened. The first of these is **THE WITNESS OF PROPHECY**. Peter explains in Acts 2:25-31. This argument begins with a lengthy quotation from David, in which David apparently insists that God is not going to allow him to die. As Peter points out, if David is talking about himself, this inspired Psalm is untrue. David DID die. His body DID undergo decay. From this, Peter reasons that David isn't actually talking about Himself. Instead, in writing this, David is acting as an inspired prophet, predicting the future, and what he is predicting is the resurrection of his remote descendant Jesus. Peter's point here is this: On its face, the claim that Jesus was resurrected from the dead is a ridiculous claim. Never before in human history, and never again since, did God intervene directly to raise a dead man. However, this claim becomes much less ridiculous when we see that God promised it would happen.

Thus for the witness of prophecy. The second witness Peter cites is **THE WITNESS OF THE APOSTLES**. He explains this quite simply, in Acts 2:32. God's promise in Psalm 16 made it certain that the resurrection of the dead would happen. The testimony of the apostles is that it HAS happened, and that the one raised was Jesus. This wasn't some self-justifying story that the apostles invented 20 years after Jesus' death. Instead, from the very beginning of the preaching of the gospel, they proclaimed that Jesus was risen. In fact, at the time Peter is saying this, it is only ten days since he watched Jesus rise into the heavens and vanish. The apostles assert that the resurrection is historical fact.

To summarize Peter's argument to this point about the resurrection of Jesus, the Scripture predicted it would happen, and the apostles claim it has happened. So that the Jews can know it has happened too, Peter introduces his third witness: **THE WITNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**. This third and final argument appears in Acts 2:33-35. Before we can explore this whole argument, though, there's a phrase in v. 33 that we need to understand: "the promise of the Holy Spirit". Grammatically, both in Greek and in English, this can mean one of two things. First, it can mean that Jesus was promised the Holy Spirit Himself, and received the Holy Spirit after being exalted to heaven. Alternatively, it can mean that the Holy Spirit made a promise to Jesus, and Jesus received the fulfillment of that promise from the Father after He was exalted to heaven. There are two obvious problems with the former of these alternatives. First, neither in Psalm 16 nor anywhere else in Scripture is Jesus promised the Holy Spirit after He ascends to heaven. That promise is simply not made. Second, we know when Jesus received the Holy Spirit and the ability to pass it on to others. That occurred at His baptism, long, long before His return to heaven. Why would He get then what He already had?

This leaves us with the second option, that the promise of the Holy Spirit is a promise made by the Holy Spirit to Jesus. Peter has already begun to point us in this direction in v. 30, when he notes that David was a prophet. No man can be a prophet unless he speaks by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so any promise David makes is logically a promise of the Holy Spirit. We see the promise to Jesus appear in v. 28—that He would enjoy eternal life in the presence of God. Indeed, that's exactly what happened to Jesus—as a reward for His faithfulness, He was raised never again to die. It is the promise of this event that is the promise of the Holy Spirit in v. 33.

From the Jews' perspective, though, there's a problem with this. Peter can assert that Jesus is currently seated at the right hand of the throne of God, but the Jews can't see Him there. This is where Jesus' outpouring of the Holy Spirit comes in. When the apostles miraculously speak in foreign languages and credit Jesus with giving them the ability to do so, they establish that Jesus is indeed where they claim He is, and He will remain there until His enemies are defeated.

This threefold argument brings us to **PETER'S CONCLUSION**. We find it in Acts 2:36, another verse to underline in Acts 2. Peter has just proven that Jesus has been raised from the dead, which shows in turn that God has elevated Jesus to the position of Lord and Christ. Once again, remember that "Christ" isn't Jesus' last name. It's a title, means the same thing as "Messiah", and signifies one who has been anointed by God as prophet, priest, and king.

Jesus, then, has been given great authority, and this poses a really big problem for the Jews, because they're the ones who crucified Him. God sent them the Messiah they had been seeking for hundreds of years, and they killed Him.

We might not immediately see what this has to do with preparing for the Lord's Supper, but in reality, it has everything to do with it. This text is what Christianity is about. If anybody asks me why I am a Christian, this is the argument I make. I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and I believe that because He was raised from the dead. I believe that He was raised from the dead because the prophecies of the Old Testament predicted that He would be, because of the eyewitness testimony of hundreds who saw Him after His resurrection, and because the testimony of those eyewitnesses was confirmed by the miracles they performed. All of this is recorded for us in the Bible, a historical record of the most important events of human history, and because the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a historical event, everything the Bible says about my salvation follows logically from it. We are not fools to identify ourselves as His disciples. We are taking a reasonable stand on the basis of the evidence. As we contemplate the death of Jesus this morning, let's be thankful that God gave us what we needed to believe that His sacrifice was effective.

Calling on His Name

We've seen that Peter builds a compelling argument that Jesus is the Lord of v. 21. From here, Peter proceeds to explain how to call on the name of this Lord, and what happens to those who do. The first portion of this section begins with anguished Jews asking, "**WHAT SHALL WE DO?**" We read this, and Peter's response, in Acts 2:37-39. Before we go on, let's pause to note the Jews' motivation for asking this question. They're not discussing whether they want to go to Olive Garden or Cracker Barrel for lunch; instead, they've realized that they have a huge problem. They were complicit in the death of Jesus, but God has raised Him from the dead and proclaimed Him Lord and Christ. It doesn't take a mental giant to realize that Jesus probably isn't going to be too happy with the people who were responsible for killing Him. The Jews know that their necks are on the chopping block. When they cry, "What shall we do?", then, they want to know how they can escape punishment for their sins. Everything in Peter's reply helps answer that question.

The reply that Peter makes prescribes two actions, tells what the consequence of those actions will be, and explains why. First, Peter says they must repent. It's not enough for them to be upset that they've crucified Jesus. Instead, they must re-dedicate their lives to serve the One they killed. Second, they must be baptized, immersed in water in the name of Jesus with the goal of receiving forgiveness of their sins. The point is not that they have already been forgiven and are told to be baptized to celebrate. Instead, as the account of Paul's conversion in Acts 22 makes plain, baptism is the means by which they call on the name of the Lord Jesus, appealing to Him to save them, and it is the waters of baptism that wash away sins. This is the invariable teaching of the New Testament. Unless we do this, we cannot be saved either.

Next, Peter explains what the result of baptism is: they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. As we saw in our analysis of v. 33, this can mean two different things. It could refer to the Holy Spirit Himself being given, or to a gift promised by the Holy Spirit being given. Once again, the second option of these two is the correct one. Remember: the goal of these penitent Jews is not to get miraculous spiritual gifts. What they want is forgiveness for killing God. Peter is going to offer them what they have been looking for, not what they haven't been. The promise Peter mentions, the promise that is for them and for their children and for all who are afar off, is nothing more than the same promise of v. 21, a promise offered through the prophet Joel by the Holy Spirit. The tongue-speaking of the apostles is only significant because it shows that the time to call on the name of the Lord has come. Anyone who does that will receive the gift promised by the Holy Spirit—the salvation of their souls. Only the apostles had been promised the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but everyone to this present day can receive the promise of salvation if we are willing to be baptized.

We see Peter's audience **OBEYING THE GOSPEL** in Acts 2:40-41. He tells them to be saved, and they are. In the denominational world, it is quite common for churches to have set baptismal days. If someone wants to be baptized, they will make them wait until that monthly or yearly day rolls around. That's not what we see here. These repentant Jews were baptized that very day, which is what we would expect them to demand if they knew their salvation depended on being baptized. From a group of 120 earlier in Acts, the number of disciples increased to thousands.

Finally, Acts 2 grants us a snapshot of **LIFE IN THE EARLY CHURCH**. This thumbnail sketch runs from Acts 2: 42-47. There is enough material in this section for an entire sermon of its own. Today, though, I'm only going to point out the main characteristics of these brethren. First, they were **devoted to worship**. They were continually involved in hearing the teaching of the apostles, spiritually sharing with one another, partaking of the Lord's Supper, and approaching God in prayer. The assembly wasn't a sometimes thing to them. It was an all-the-time thing, and if we truly want to be like these early Christians, the assembly needs to be an all-the-time thing for us too.

Second, they were **devoted to God**. It's interesting to me that in v. 43, the awe these Christians felt is mentioned before the miracles of the apostles. They weren't awed because of all the whiz-bang stuff Peter and the other could do. They were awed because they had killed the Son of God, but He had chosen to redeem them anyway. Even today, our lives as Christians should be filled with the awe of our salvation.

Third, these first-century brethren were **devoted to one another**. They worshiped together every day, they ate together every day, and they enjoyed it. They were closer to their brothers and sisters in Christ than many people are to

their flesh-and-blood families. Naturally, this closeness extended to caring for the physical needs of their brethren. They thought nothing of surrendering all of their possessions to help a brother if he needed it. Once again, friends, if we are truly committed to being like the first-century church, this is the way that we need to behave too.

Finally, the early church was **devoted to evangelism**. This is evident from the results they were seeing. If people were daily being saved and added to the church, that was because people in the church were daily teaching and converting lost people. They weren't merely waiting for opportunities to come along. They were actively seeking and creating opportunities to talk about their faith, because their faith was what was on their hearts. Thankfully, we serve the same Lord they did, and He isn't any less impressive today than He was 2000 years ago. If we put in the study and prayer to sanctify Him in our hearts like they did, we will find the opportunities to proclaim Him like they did.