

## Acts 2:14-41, No. 5

### “The First Sermon in the Last Days”

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I do not plan to spend years on end preaching through Acts. As a result I cannot spend several months preaching through Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost. That would be easy to do. It is chock-full of rich material worthy of attention but I will pass most of it by without comment to concentrate on the main point. I want you to hear the sermon as its original audience heard it, as an argument leading inexorably to a challenge.

This is the first discourse, speech, or sermon in Acts, but it will not be the last. Almost a quarter of the book is made up of speeches or sermons by Peter, Stephen, and Paul. What we have, of course, are summaries of what was said, not a verbatim account, as will be made clear in v. 40. What is particularly important is the fact that the central themes of Peter’s address will be repeated in the other speeches that follow throughout the book. [Peterson, 144]

### Text Comment

- v.22 Peter uses three terms: *mighty works*, literally “powers,” works, that is, that could be explained only by the power of God; *wonders*, acts that arouse astonishment and awe; and *signs*, works – I say “works” because Jesus *did* them – that signify or embody or teach or represent spiritual reality and truth. [Peterson, 145]

There was no fear on Peter’s part that people would dispute the miracles of Jesus. Even the Lord’s worst enemies had not denied that he performed miracles, works of wondrous power. They had attributed them to the power of the Devil, but that the supernatural had been unleashed in the ministry of Jesus no witness of that ministry – friend or foe – could or did dispute.

- v.23 The obvious question, especially for someone who had not been in Palestine during the Lord’s ministry, as many of these visitors would not have been, was: if Jesus had such a powerful ministry, why was he put to death? Peter’s answer is twofold: “lawless men” is probably a reference both to the Jews who hated Jesus because of their jealousy of him and to the Romans, who acted without regard for truth or justice. But, more importantly, Jesus did not die because of a ghastly miscalculation on his part or because his hopes and plans had come to nothing, but because such a death had been his intention from the beginning: as he himself had said, “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for many.” Jesus himself had made a great point of the fact that there was never to be any other end of his ministry but the cross and that he went to Jerusalem knowing that he would be crucified and willingly gave himself up to that death. Men certainly acted wickedly in putting him to death and were responsible for their crimes, but unwittingly they had accomplished God’s will and unintentionally had contributed to the salvation of the world.

- v.24 In other words, the sentence of men was reversed by a higher court! It was impossible for Jesus to stay dead not only because he was the Messiah, because he had perfectly completed the assignment his Father had given him when he sent him into the world, but because the Scripture had prophesied his resurrection. The citation of Psalm 16 that follows is not offered *to prove* the resurrection; the disciples can do that themselves with their own eyewitness testimony. It indicates rather that the Lord's resurrection proves that he was the Messiah, the promised descendant of King David.
- v.31 Peter and his Jewish hearers agreed that what David had written must be true, they agreed that he was a prophet and wrote about the future and, in particular, about the Christ, the Messiah.
- v.32 Remember, Jesus had taught his disciples during the forty days that separated his resurrection from his ascension how the word of God predicted his life and his ministry. Through the course of the ministry they were struggling to understand what in the world was going on. After his resurrection the Lord Jesus took time to take the Word of God, piece by piece and text by text, and explain to them how it had predicted all that eventually came to pass. Psalm 16 must have been among those texts that the Lord had explained to them, and so Psalm 110. A witness is someone who has seen or heard things and so can verify the truthfulness of an account.
- v.35 The citation of Psalm 110 serves further to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. His ascension to heaven was part of his enthronement as the King of Kings.
- v.36 The resurrection of Jesus was not merely a revivification. It was an enthronement, an exaltation. Jesus had been granted sovereignty in the world. He is not only the Savior of the world, *he is its Lord!*
- v.37 "Cut to the heart" means that they had been convinced of their sin and were conscience-stricken. [Stott, 78] No wonder the response of the people? Here were Jews discovering that they had been the *enemies of their own Messiah!*
- v.38 In the context of Acts as a whole "gift of the Holy Spirit" refers not to the power to learn languages without work, without a dictionary, or without a grammar – a miracle for the moment only – but the ministry of the Holy Spirit transforming one's life and equipping him or her to serve the Lord, which up to this point these people had failed to do.
- v.40 Repentance and faith in Jesus and following him inevitably meant then as it does now a break with the culture, the thought-world, and the accepted patterns of behavior. No one can be at peace with this world's way of life and a true follower of Jesus. One must always choose one or the other.

The miracle of languages had arrested everyone's attention. They wanted an explanation. And so Peter gave it to them. And what is most important about that explanation is that it has everything to do with Jesus. We might have supposed that Peter would have talked about the Holy Spirit. After all, it was the Holy Spirit who had come, with the sound of a great wind and with tongues

as of fire; it was the Spirit who had empowered them to speak languages they had never learned, and the Spirit who had prompted them to leave the house where they had been gathered to enter the streets to proclaim the mighty works of God. Surely Peter would tell the assembled congregation about the Spirit of God.

But, in fact, Peter doesn't talk about the Holy Spirit much at all. His sermon, from start to finish, is about Jesus Christ. He begins with a short summary of his life and ministry, with the accent falling on his miracle working power, of which many in the crowd would have known and of which even the visitors would have heard. He then refers to his death on the cross and, at one and the same time, the crime of it and the divinely ordained purpose lying behind it. In this short summary of Peter's sermon we get no detail about how the cross secured the forgiveness of sins, though it is very likely that Peter explained how Christ's death was a sacrifice for sin, not for his sin but for ours.

Peter then moves on to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, how his cruel death was followed on the third day by his triumphant victory over death. The resurrection, something that had never happened before in human history, was the demonstration that Jesus was none other than the long-promised Messiah, the descendant of David who would deliver the people of God from their bondage.

From the resurrection – concerning which rumors must have been swirling throughout Jerusalem – Peter proceeded to the Lord's ascension and exaltation to God's right hand. The very same Jesus of Nazareth who had caused such a stir in the land for three years, the very same Jesus whom a good number of these people would have laid eyes on at one time or another, had been granted a position of Supreme power and sovereignty. Now, to be sure, taking together all that we are taught in the New Testament about Jesus, he was God himself from eternity, the creator of heaven and earth. That is why the Bible speaks of his *coming into* the world. He was Eternal God; he became also a man – he took to his everlasting person a human nature – which is what we mean by his *incarnation*. What is being said here concerns the incarnate Christ, not God the Son in his eternal deity but Jesus Christ the God/Man. It is *this* Jesus who sits at the Right Hand and rules over all things.

Let me say at this point that what Peter has said about Jesus, his miracles, his death on the cross as God's plan for the salvation of the world, his resurrection from the dead, his ascension to the Right Hand, his rule over heaven and earth, I say *this is* from beginning to end the Bible's identification of Jesus. This is what is true about Jesus of Nazareth, remarkable, marvelous as it is. This is what people need to know about him. This is what makes him so fabulously important to each and every human being on the face of the earth. This is why he or she who has the Son has life, and he or she who does not have the Son does not have life!

Jesus is, as you know, a very popular figure. It is hard to find anyone who will condemn him publicly. So, William Ellery Channing, the father of the Unitarians, could say of Jesus,

“I contemplate him with a veneration second only to that with which I look upward to God.”

Or David Strauss, the 19<sup>th</sup> century German scholar, could say of Jesus,

“He represents within the religious sphere, the highest point beyond which humanity cannot go.”

Or Ernst Renan, Strauss’ French contemporary, could say of Jesus,

“Whatever may be the surprises of the future, this Jesus will never be surpassed; none greater than he has been born among the children of men.”

But none of these men believed any of the statements that Peter here made about Jesus. They didn’t believe he actually performed miracles, that his death on the cross was the plan and purpose of God, that he rose bodily from the dead, and that he ascended to heaven to return from there in due time. They believed he was a great man, a great teacher, a great example of humility and compassion that we should strive to emulate, but that is all. In comparison to the picture of Jesus we are given here by one of his closest companions, an eyewitness of his entire ministry, such compliments of Jesus are patronizing. He doesn’t ask for our compliments, he demands our worship, our faith and our submission. The New Testament is utterly uninterested in such humanistic assessments of Jesus because they leave out everything that makes him the Savior of the world and the King of Kings. Wherever you look in the Bible, Jesus will be the one that Peter described in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost: miracle worker, willing sacrifice, and resurrected and ascended Lord and Savior.

And so we come in v. 33 to Peter’s answer to the people’s question. They had asked: “What does this mean, (v. 13) this phenomenal thing that we have witnessed. And now Peter gives the answer: What you saw and heard was the work of the very man many of you thought was dead! What this means – the descent of the Holy Spirit, the disciples’ proclamation of the good news in these various languages by the power of the Holy Spirit – is that Jesus is still at work in the world, but now not immediately and visibly as he had been, but by the Holy Spirit he has sent in his place.

What had happened was that the same Jesus who had lived and taught and worked wonders among them was still among them, if in a different way and form. And that meant that that Jesus really is the Lord, not just a lord, he is *the* Lord. He is the savior of the world and he is the King of Kings. That is what the arrival of the Holy Spirit meant. *Jesus is reigning from heaven!*

You remember, the night before his crucifixion in the Upper Room, when Jesus was telling his disciples about what the Holy Spirit would do when he came in place of the Lord Jesus who was returning to heaven, he had said:

“When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth...he will bear witness *about me*. [John 15:26]

“He will glorify *me*, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” [16:14]

Indeed, Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would be sent, “in *my* name,” (14:26) that is, as Jesus’ own spokesman or representative. In other words, the great ministry of the Holy Spirit will be to mediate the presence of Christ, to convince people of the truth about him, and to make Jesus glorious in their sight. There is a perfect love and humility in the inner life of the Godhead. The Son is always eager and ready to obey the Father, the Father is always eager to display the glory of his Son, and the Holy Spirit finds his fulfillment – if I can speak so of the mystery of God’s inner life – in drawing the attention of human beings not to himself but to Jesus Christ.

So, when Jesus said, in those same remarks about the coming of the Holy Spirit the night of his betrayal, that the Spirit convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, that too had everything to do with convincing the world that Jesus Christ alone is the savior we all need and the Lord who rules over us whether men know it or not.

Dr. Packer helpfully describes the ministry of the Holy Spirit as a “floodlight ministry.” In his fine book on the Holy Spirit we find this reminiscence.

“I remember walking to a church one winter evening to preach on the words ‘he shall glorify me,’ seeing the building floodlit as I turned a corner, and realizing that this was exactly the illustration my message needed. When floodlighting is well done, the floodlights are so placed that you do not see them; you are not in fact supposed to see where the light is coming from; what you are meant to see is just the building on which the floodlights are trained. The intended effect is to make it visible when otherwise it would not be seen for the darkness, and to maximize its dignity by throwing all its details into relief so that you see it properly. This perfectly illustrates the Spirit’s...role. He is, so to speak, the hidden floodlight shining on the Savior.” [Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 66]

You know the Holy Spirit is at work when people find themselves able to see Jesus Christ, when they realize who he is and what he has done and what that must mean for them. You know the Holy Spirit is at work when people believe in Jesus, commit their lives to him, rest their hopes of the future on him and follow him. The summons of the Bible is never “Believe in the Holy Spirit and you will be saved,” but “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” It is Jesus Christ who died for you, not the Holy Spirit. But without the Holy Spirit no one *would* believe, no one *would* understand his or her true condition, no one *would* ever be willing to turn his back on his own culture and culture’s way of thinking, no matter how corrupt, to follow Jesus Christ.

Look there were people who witnessed the miracles of Jesus, knew what he had done, knew that there was no natural explanation for what had happened, *and still would not believe in him*, indeed they hated him for it! Such is the hardness of the human heart and the stubbornness of the human will. But on that Pentecost Sunday 3,000 people, who woke that morning with not a thought that they would be by day’s end followers of Jesus of Nazareth, had been baptized; had crossed a Rubicon over which there could be no return.

When the Holy Spirit reveals Jesus Christ to people their lives change. A fundamental reorientation of loyalty, of understanding, and of purpose takes place. Look at these people.

They were, like most people, self-satisfied. They would have happily admitted that they weren't perfect, but they had no inkling that their lives were a profound offense to their creator; they had never imagined that they were in desperate need of a salvation only God himself was powerful enough to provide. *They were there for the feast for goodness sake; they had come a great distance to that feast; surely God was pleased with them!*

But as they listened to Peter, and, more importantly, as the Holy Spirit convinced them of the truth of what he was saying, they suddenly found themselves undone, face to face with their own moral failure, face to face with the judgment of God, a judgment they realized for the first time they thoroughly deserved.

Religion for them up to that point was a predictable calculation of acts of worship and service leading to God's approval. That is what religion is for most people in the world still today. But breaking upon their consciences was the realization that they had utterly underestimated their own moral failure and radically overestimated God's indifference to it. For the first time they knew they needed something that was utterly beyond them: some way to be reconciled with God. They needed God's forgiveness. How was it to be obtained?

So Peter told them: Repent and be baptized. But, as Peter made clear, repentance – the turning away from sin to a life of righteousness – requires first a turning *to* Jesus Christ. You must repent, as you must be baptized, *in the name of Jesus Christ*. You must, in other words, avail yourself of the sacrifice Jesus made for your sins, and you must honor and obey him as the Lord, which he is. Repentance in Acts, as everywhere else in the Bible, “means a radical reorientation of life with respect to Jesus,” grieving over and confessing our failure to honor him as Savior and Lord and seeking in all things now to obey and serve him. That is the conviction the Holy Spirit worked into those unsuspecting hearts and minds that day, and that is the conviction he works into Christian hearts every day all over the world, and into Christian hearts day after day after day. The Holy Spirit makes men and women, boys and girls, to feel the reality of God through the Lord Jesus Christ: the guilt and evil of our sin against God and our fellow human beings, God's loving insistence on changing and rebuilding our characters while he forgives us for what we have done amiss.

One proof of all of this, of course, is that what the Holy Spirit did for those 3,000 that long ago day he has been doing ever since. In 1908 some missionaries in Manchuria wrote home observations of their gospel work.

“A power has come into the church that we cannot control if we would. It is a miracle for [a] stolid, self-righteous [Chinese man] to go out of his way to confess to sins that no torture...could force from him; for a [Chinese man] to demean himself to crave, weeping, the prayers of his fellow-believers is beyond all human explanation.

“Perhaps you will say it's a sort of religious hysteria. So did some of us... But here we are, about sixty Scottish and Irish Presbyterians who have seen it – all shades of temperament – and, much as many of us shrank from it at first, everyone who has seen and heard what we have, every day last week, is certain there is only *one* explanation – that it is God's Holy Spirit manifesting himself.... One clause of the Creed that lives

before us now in all its inevitable, awful solemnity is, *‘I believe in the Holy Ghost.’*”  
[Packer, *Keep in Step*, 12]

What they were saying was that for Chinese men to behave this way, to honestly acknowledge their moral fault, to cry out to God and to one another for forgiveness was so extraordinary, so unlikely, so unexpected that it required an explanation. And their explanation was the same that we have been given here in Acts 2. What had happened in Manchuria in 1908 and ten thousand other places in ten thousand different times was the very thing that had happened on Pentecost Sunday. The Spirit of God had overthrown in an instant these people’s long nourished self-righteousness, had stripped away their self-satisfaction and peace, had revealed to them Jesus Christ as the Savior of sinners and the King of Kings, and made it luminously clear that there was nothing for them to do but confess their sins, plead for salvation from the only one who could give it to them, Jesus Christ, and then honor him as the Lord that he is. And in doing so, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, they found forgiveness, peace with God, and a new and far, far better life. What Peter’s sermon teaches us is, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it,

“The religion of Christ is not a tidbit after one’s bread; on the contrary, it is the bread or it is nothing. People should at least understand this and concede this...” [Metaxas, 69]

And so this is challenge of our text to non-Christians and Christians alike, to people who wonder if they are Christians, and to those who believe, and perhaps with very good reason that they are. Is this our conviction as well: that we are sinners and Jesus Christ is the Savior the merciful heavenly Father has provided for sinners? That the amazing truth about Jesus being what it is, are we living our lives in keeping with that truth? Are we followers of Jesus? Have we repented and are we repenting of our sins. We all have sins to repent of! Are we turning from our sins to Jesus Christ and to the life of faith in him? Are we looking to him for both forgiveness and for the grace of the Holy Spirit to be able to rise above our sins and begin to put them to death?

Have we in fact, not simply in pretense, but in fact turned our backs on this generation of ours, our culture’s way of life and thought, its many conceits, its myths and its orthodoxies, to follow Jesus alone because he is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? And if we can answer those questions positively, *how* are we repenting, of what sins are we repenting, and how are we saving ourselves from our very corrupt generation?

These are the great questions that the Bible relentlessly forces upon our minds *because everything Peter said about Jesus Christ is true*. The inexorable logic of Peter’s challenge may be put in this way: If the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was prophesied long before he entered the world, if he indeed performed mighty works of supernatural power, if he went willingly to the cross because our salvation required that he bear in our place the punishment our sins deserved, if in fact he alone of all human beings rose from the dead to new and everlasting life, if he left the world promising to return, and, we might add, if he sent his Holy Spirit to convince men and women of all of this and in the ages since vast numbers of human beings have had the same experience and found the same convictions forming in their minds as did those 3,000 on Pentecost, *why would we not repent and turn to Christ* – present with us in the world through his Holy Spirit – *why would we not* embrace the way of salvation that God himself devised through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son?

Peter spoke with complete confidence of these things, he appealed to the assembly to repent and believe in the certainty that this and this alone could meet their present and eternal need. He knew he was speaking the truth because he had been there and seen it all. And now the Holy Spirit had given him voice to proclaim what he knew to others. The message is the same, precisely the same, the challenge is the same, precisely the same today, at this very moment for you, for me, as it was for them two thousand years ago. The challenge is the same. *Answer it!*