

## Acts 2:37-40

### Introduction

For six weeks, now, we've been exploring Acts chapter two and the meaning of that redemptive-historical event that we call Pentecost. Because this is a redemptive-historical event, we can only rightly understand it in the light of all that redemptive history that has come before it. We can only understand it when understand how this is, in a sense, the climactic event in all of redemptive history.

By now, it should be clear to us that the first (or primary) Actor at Pentecost is not the Holy Spirit, but Christ, our risen King who having been exalted to the right hand of God and having received the promise of the Holy Spirit, has now poured out the Holy Spirit upon His people. The focus of Peter's sermon is not on the Holy Spirit, but on the person of Jesus Christ—His life, His death, His resurrection, His ascension to the right hand of God, His receiving and pouring out the Holy Spirit, and His present rule and reign until all His enemies are made a footstool for His feet. It is the Holy Spirit who applies the finished work of Christ to His people and who manifests the present rule of Christ among His people. The whole thrust of Peter's sermon, then, is summed up in his concluding words:

- Acts 2:36 — “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”

We come, now, to the people's response to Peter's proclamation of the Gospel.

**I. Acts 2:37** — Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men, brothers, what should we do?”

To say that the people were “pierced to the heart” is simply to say that they were deeply convicted with an awareness of their great guilt. When our Baptist confession speaks of a person's repentance, it sets this repentance in the context of that person “being by the Holy Spirit made sensible of the manifold evils of his sin” (LCF 15.3). In other words, the point is not first of all the negative consequences of sin to us (the fear of judgment), but the “filthiness and odiousness” of sin in itself as that which is “contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God” (WCF 15.2). Here in Acts 2, the people have suddenly become “sensible” to the fact that they are “guilty, not only of judicial murder, but of blasphemy and treason [against] their rightful sovereign” (Alexander)—against God's own anointed Messiah whom He sent into the world. And now, because the people had been made sensible of the manifold evil of their sin, they were also terrified by the reality of blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke, of the sun being turned into darkness and the moon into blood. Because they were convicted with an awareness of their guilt, therefore they were also trembling with an awareness of the judgment of God that was hanging over them.

What does the people's response to Peter's preaching of the Gospel in Acts 2 mean for what our own response must be to the preaching of the Gospel? On the one hand, we must be careful that we don't make a genuine conversion dependent upon being “sufficiently” pierced to the heart.

Because that particular Jewish generation was guilty of such a heinous sin—a sin that was only possible at one particular moment in redemptive history, and a sin such that it called for all the righteous blood shed on earth to be charged against that generation—therefore their awareness of guilt and of impending judgment must have been very much an overwhelming crisis experience. But we must not make this crisis experience the standard for all future generations of those who would truly be converted.

On the other hand, the Gospel message is always the message of salvation from the guilt of personal sin and so also from that righteous judgment that our sin demands. So how can we see our need for salvation from this guilt and from the judgment that is due to our sin without a corresponding conviction of this guilt and a corresponding trembling under that judgment that hangs over each one of us outside of Jesus Christ? How can we have truly seen our need for salvation when there's been no "piercing" of the heart at all—when there's been no conviction and no trembling that causes us to ask, "What should we do?" The fact of the matter is that at this moment, the people probably aren't presuming that there is anything to be done. I wonder if we could translate their question like this: "What can we do (*ti poiesomen*)? What is there for us to do? Is there any hope for us?" While that particular generation of Jews had a unique reason to be asking this question given the unique sin of which they were guilty, this is also, in a real sense, the question that we must all feel personally compelled to ask if we would be saved (cf. Acts 16:30). What hope is there for me? What must I do? How can I to be freed from the defilement and guilt of my sin and the coming righteous judgment that my sin deserves? It's in the context of this question that the Gospel imperative comes to us as the awesome good news that it truly is.

## II. Acts 2:38a — And Peter said to them, "Repent..."

It's not enough to be pierced to the heart. It's not enough to be convicted that one is guilty of sin or to tremble under the prospect of coming judgment. Having been pierced to the heart, we must repent. This is the imperative that John the Baptist came preaching:

- Matthew 3:1–2 — Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

This is also the imperative that Jesus came preaching:

- Matthew 4:17 — From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The baptism of John was "a baptism of repentance" (cf. Mat. 3:11; Lk. 3:3; Acts 13:24; 19:4) and now Christian baptism is also a baptism of repentance ("Repent and... be baptized," Peter says).

Repentance is essential to the forgiveness of sins and eternal life—even though it's not the ground of these things. Jesus said to the Jews in Luke chapter 13, "I tell you... unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Lk. 13:3, 5). Paul speaks of a godly sorrow that "produces a repentance without regret that leads to [that is unto (eis)] salvation (2 Cor. 7:10). In Luke chapter 3 we read that John's baptism was a "baptism of repentance for [unto (eis)] the forgiveness of sins (Lk. 3:3; cf. Mk. 1:4). In Luke 24 we read that "repentance and forgiveness of sins" is to be

proclaimed in Jesus' name to all the nations (Lk. 24:47). In Acts 5 the apostles proclaim that God has exalted Jesus to His right hand "to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31). In Acts chapter 11 we see that "God has granted to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to [that is unto (eis)] life" (Acts 11:18). In these last two verses, we see that while repenting is something that we do (and that we are commanded to do), it's also an "evangelical [Gospel] grace." Repentance is a gift that God never fails to grant to all His elect in the Covenant of Grace (cf. 2 Tim. 2:25; LCF 15.2). Therefore, wherever there is the absence of this gift of repentance, there cannot be the presence of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Here in Acts 2, Peter says, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for [*eis*; unto] the forgiveness of your sins."

What, then, is this repentance that is required of us, and that God gives so freely to all those whom He has called to Himself? The basic meaning of the Greek word for repentance is a "change of mind" or a "change of thinking." So the Greek translation of Proverbs 20:25 reads:

- Proverbs 20:25 [Brenton] — It is a snare to a man hastily to consecrate some of his own property: for in that case repentance comes after vowing [later he changes his mind about the vow he made in haste].

We read in 1 Samuel:

- 1 Samuel 15:29 [Brenton] — God... is not as a man to repent [to change His mind].

But evangelical/gospel repentance is not just a change of mind; it includes a resulting change of course and direction—a fundamentally new orientation of our lives. For example, we might think of being oriented no longer to the "south pole" but oriented to the "north pole" (or vice versa). Instead of our lives being oriented in the direction of self and sin, our lives are now to be oriented in the direction of God and righteousness. Repentance, therefore, is not simply to change our thinking, it's also to turn—emphasizing both a turning from and a turning to.

With respect to the turning from, the writer of Hebrews speaks of "repentance from dead works" (Heb. 6:1). In Acts 8, Peter will say to Simon Magus:

- Acts 8:22 (cf. Jer. 8:6 LXX) — "Therefore repent of [turn away from] this wickedness of yours..."

In Revelation chapter 9, we read:

- Revelation 9:20–21 (cf. 2 Cor. 12:21) — ...the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent *of* [turn *from*] the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk. And they did not repent of [turn from] their murders... their sorceries... their sexual immorality... [or] their thefts.

We have to be careful again, because in many of these examples we might especially picture a radical, crisis experience of conversion. The confession is helpful when it specifically mentions

those who are “converted at riper years, having sometime [for an extended time] lived in the state of nature, and therein served divers pleasures” (LCF 15.1). For these people, repentance is something radically obvious and visible. If they do not turn from their murders, their sorceries, their sexual immorality, or their thefts—if they do not make a sudden, decisive break with these practices, then of course they cannot be saved. On the other hand, for those who grow up in a Christian home and are saved at a young age, or for those who’ve grown up in a religious environment and ordered their life externally according to a high moral ethic, there may not be the same “crisis experience” of repentance with a sudden and radically visible outward change. And yet there will always be a fundamental change in orientation. A conviction of the guilt of personal sin must lead to a change of mind and thinking *about* sin and so also a turning away *from* sin. Jesus said:

- Luke 5:32 (cf. 15:7) — “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Since all have sinned (Rom. 3:23), therefore, it is required of all of us that we repent. Jesus said that repentance for forgiveness of sins was to be proclaimed in His name “to all the nations (Lk. 24:46-47). And the Apostle Paul proclaimed:

- Acts 17:30 (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9) — “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now commanding men that everyone everywhere should repent...”

Repentance is not only a turning away from sin, but also a turning “unto God,” as the catechism says, “with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience” (BC Q. 92). In Acts chapter 3, Peter will exhort the people:

- Acts 3:19 — “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord [to whom you have returned]...”

In Acts 14, Paul will say to the pagan crowd wanting to offer sacrifice to him and to Barnabas:

- Acts 14:15 — “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, proclaiming the gospel to you that you should *turn from* these vain things *to* a living God...”

When Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, He told him:

- Acts 26:17-18 — I am sending you [to the Gentiles], to open their eyes so that they may *turn from* darkness *to* light and *from* the authority of Satan *to* God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins...

Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians:

- 1 Thessalonians 1:9 — For they themselves report about us what kind of an entrance we had with you, and how you *turned to* God *from* idols *to serve* a living and true God...

Are you getting the picture of this beautiful, wonderful thing called repentance? The repentance that God commands and that is required of us is not something “negative” or even something of lesser importance or value than faith, but a precious gift imparted to us in and through the covenant of grace. This is why I love how the chapter on Repentance is titled in our Confession: not just “Of Repentance,” but “Of Repentance Unto Life and Salvation.” Repentance, therefore, is both an evangelical command (an imperative) and an evangelical (Gospel) grace.

That repentance is a turning away from sin and a turning “unto God with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience” can also be seen in the fact that when John was baptizing with the baptism of repentance, he warned the Pharisees and Sadducees who were coming to him for baptism to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Mat. 3:7-8). In Acts 26, Paul testified before King Agrippa that he “did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, practicing deeds appropriate to repentance” (Acts 26:19-20; cf. Rev. 2:5). Notice that in these two passages a distinction is made between repentance and the fruit that is “in keeping with” repentance; between repentance and the deeds that are “appropriate to” repentance. We’re never told to “bear fruit” or to “practice deeds” unto the forgiveness of sins, but only to repent unto the forgiveness of sins. Repentance, therefore, is not the same thing as its “fruits” and “deeds” but rather a turning unto God “with full purpose of and endeavor after” these fruits and deeds. Rather than being about a specific level of obedience or holiness that we must attain to, it’s about the fundamental and defining orientation of our lives. Do you have this repentance unto life and salvation? Have you turned from your sins unto God with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience?

In order to fully understand repentance, we must understand the relationship between repentance and faith. We’ve already seen that there are places in the Bible where the sinner’s saving response to the Gospel is summed up in just one word: “Repent.” There are other places where the sinner’s saving response to the Gospel is summed up with a different word: “Believe.” Jesus said:

- John 6:40 (cf. 3:16) — “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life.”

Paul and Silas said to the Philippian jailor:

- Acts 16:30–31 — “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

What this tells us is that repentance and faith are inextricably bound together. There are other places in the Bible where the sinner’s saving response to the Gospel is summed up in two words: “Repent and believe.” Mark says that “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying”:

- Mark 1:15 (cf. Acts 19:4; Heb. 6:1) — “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

The Apostle Paul said to the Ephesians elders:

- Acts 20:20–21 — “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable... solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

On the one hand, we must not confuse repentance and faith with each other. We’re not justified by repentance, but by faith alone. And yet if repentance is a turning away from sin and a turning unto God, then this turning unto God must only be possible by faith in Christ. The catechism puts it beautifully:

Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, *and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ* [that’s saving faith; cf. LCF 15.3], does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience (BC Q. 92).

While repentance is not the same thing as faith and must always be distinguished from faith, faith is so necessarily bound up in and with repentance that to call the people to repent *is*—at the same time—to call the people to this saving faith. Indeed, here in Acts chapter two, we read:

**III. Acts 2:38b** — And Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.”

When Peter says to be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ,” he’s not identifying a different baptismal formula from the Trinitarian formula that Jesus gave in the Great Commission (Mat. 28:19). He’s distinguishing Christian baptism from all other “baptisms”—from the traditional Jewish washings and purifications, and even from the preparatory baptism of John (cf. Acts 19:3–5; Alexander). Baptism “in the name of Jesus Christ” means, as one commentator says, baptism “by his authority, acknowledging his claims, subscribing to his doctrines, engaging in his service, *and relying on his merits*” (Alexander; emphasis mine). If Christian baptism is a “baptism of repentance,” it’s also a baptism of saving faith in Jesus Christ. Ananias will say to Paul:

- Acts 22:16 (cf. 1 Pet. 3:21) — “Now why do you delay? Rise up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, *calling on His name.*”

Which reminds us of Peter’s earlier quotation from Joel:

- Acts 2:21 — “And it will be that everyone who *calls on the name of the Lord* will be saved.”

To be baptized, then, “in the name of Jesus Christ,” is the sign of calling upon His name in saving faith; as the catechism puts it, of receiving and resting upon Christ alone for salvation, as He is offered to us in the gospel (BC Q. 91; cf. LCF 14.2). So we read in John chapter one:

- John 1:12 — But as many as *received Him*, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who *believe in His name.*

Along with repentance, it's this saving faith that's represented by baptism "in the name of Jesus Christ."

**IV. Acts 2:38c** — "Repent," says Peter, "and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for [*eis*; unto; with a view to] the forgiveness of your sins."

Peter isn't saying that the forgiveness of sins is the result of our repentance or of the physical ordinance of water baptism. When Peter calls the people to repent, he's not calling them to a legalistic or meritorious work. He's simply calling them to that "turning from" and "turning to" that is inherent to, and even of the essence of saving faith. Peter's call to repent, therefore, is from beginning to end good news. To those who have just asked the question, "What can we do? What is there for us to do? Is there any hope for us," Peter answers: Repent!—for the forgiveness of your sins. Likewise, when Peter calls the people to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, he's not calling them to a legalistic or meritorious work. He's calling them to that external sign not only of their repentance and faith, but also of Christ's forgiving them of all the guilt and penalty—and cleansing them from all the stain and defilement—of their sin. The Gospel command to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ is, from beginning to end, good news. To those who ask, "Men, brothers, what should we do?" Peter answers:

**V. Acts 2:38d** — "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

You who nailed Jesus to a cross by the hands of lawless men and put Him to death will yourselves be welcomed into Christ's kingdom. You will receive all the eschatological blessings (righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit; Rom. 14:17) of the risen Messiah's present rule and reign—of that one whom God has made both Lord and Christ." The imperative of the Gospel (repent and be baptized) is also the good news of the Gospel. To all who have ever asked, "What should I do?" this answer is always given. There is no one who's ever told: "There's no hope for you." It's this good news that Peter emphasizes in verse 39:

**VI. Acts 2:39** — "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself."

It's as though Peter anticipates their question: Can this promise really be for me" and answers with the sweetest and most joyous news that any sinner could ever hear: Yes, "the promise is for you." No matter who you are or what you've done, both the Gospel imperative ("repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ") and the Gospel promise ("for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit") are always the same (cf. 1 Tim. 1:12-16).

"The promise is for you," Peter says, "and your children and for all who are far off." The point of "your children" is not household units but rather the next generation (cf. Mat. 3:9; 10:21; 21:28-30; Jn. 8:39; Acts 13:32-33), and by implication all the generations after that even unto the end of the age (cf. Acts 2:17; Mat. 28:20). The promise isn't just for them, but for their children; the promise never expires but is the same in every generation until Christ returns. It's the same today. Even as the promise extends to all who are far off in time (to future generations), so it also

extends to all who are “far off” in place—even to the Gentiles. Peter is thinking of Isaiah chapter 57 where God says:

- Isaiah 57:18–19 (cf. Eph. 2:13-14, 17-18) — “I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and pay him and his mourners in full with comfort, creating the praise of the lips. Peace, peace *to him who is far* and to him who is near,” says Yahweh, “and I [I who have seen his ways] will heal him.”

On what basis can Peter say that “the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off? He can say this because the promise is, in the end, for “as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” Peter is thinking here, of Joel chapter two:

- Joel 2:32 — “And it will be that everyone who calls on the name of Yahweh will be delivered; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be those who escape, as Yahweh has said, *even among the survivors whom Yahweh calls.*”

The promise, then, is not finally dependent upon anything that we have done (not even on our repenting or believing or being baptized or calling upon the name of the Lord), but only upon the sovereign grace of Him who has “called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus from all eternity” (2 Tim. 1:9).

**VI. Acts 2:40 (cf. Deut. 32:5; 78:8)** — And [so] with many other words [Peter] solemnly bore witness and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this crooked generation!”

The passive imperative, “Be saved!” here in verse 40 (cf. “be baptized”) is complemented by the active imperative, “Repent!” in verse 38. Allow yourselves to be saved, says Peter. Do not harden your hearts, but rather “repent and each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Repent!—And you will be saved; for the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.

Let us first of all, then, be sure that we have repented—that having been made sensible of the manifold evils of our sin, and having apprehended the mercy of God in Christ, we have turned from our sin unto God with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience. And then let us be sure that the Gospel we preach to others always issues in a call to that Gospel grace which is: “repentance unto life and salvation.”