

Sermon 7, What Pentecost Means: Pt. 1, Acts 2:16-36

Proposition: Pentecost means that God has acted in Jesus to bring last-days salvation to the house of Israel.

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Introduction

Have you ever wondered about the sermons in Acts — why on earth they are so short? How did Peter preach a discourse that takes 3 minutes to read, and by means of that discourse convince 3,000 people to believe in Jesus? If that was the case, why don't we just go ahead and adopt 5-minute sermons in general? Maybe the church would be more effective, right? But a close reading of the passage indicates that what we have here is essentially no more than the outline of Peter's sermon, and that to properly preach this sermon could easily occupy two to four hours. I have taken the liberty of outlining Peter's sermon in the same style that I usually use to outline my own sermons, and the result is on the back of your bulletin. As you can see, the outline is long. Pretty much all of the capital letter points (A, B, etc.) are quite sufficient for an ordinary sermon in one of our churches today. But Peter didn't preach just one of those capital letters. He preached this entire discourse, with "many other words" too, as v. 40 so clearly tells us. We are not going to look at all of Peter's points in detail this morning. In fact, we are going to take today to try to get our minds around the first step in the argument of this powerful sermon, and next Sunday to get our minds around the second step in its argument. On the third Sunday, we will look at the sermon's mechanics. So today and next Sunday: Peter's main argument, which is that the coming of the Spirit means that God has acted in Jesus to bring last-days salvation to the house of Israel. The following Sunday: How Peter preached, with lessons for preachers (and listeners) today. But on to Peter's argument.

I. God Kept His Promise to Pour Out His Spirit, vv. 16-22

As we will observe next week, Peter's sermon is intellectually demanding. He does not simply give a few simple ideas that are easily absorbed. Part of the difficulty here is Luke's condensing process, of course, as Peter's illustrations, transitions, etc. are not spelled out. But the flip side of that difficulty means that this text is rich. It is full of gospel meat for hungry saints.

Peter begins with his first major point: What you're seeing is explained by the descent of the Spirit, and the descent of the Spirit is explained by God's promise to pour Him out! As we'll

comment next week, Peter does not proclaim this in a vacuum. His sermon began with the question his audience was actually asking — a key point for preachers then and now. They wanted to know the explanation for what they were seeing; Peter wanted to tell them that explanation.

A. Text: Joel 2:28-32

And so he introduces his text: Joel 2:28-32. We could do a whole sermon series on the book of Joel, and I would certainly love to do so. But unsurprisingly, Peter quotes the Psalms 3 times for the one time he quotes from a minor prophet. We'll talk about that in a minute; suffice it to say that Joel wrote sometime during the OT era. His book, like the book of Job, is timeless. It contains no references to dateable events in political history in the prophet's own day. Instead, it is entirely about God's latter-day judgment, symbolized under the image of a plague of locusts. And then, the prophet introduces the message of the pouring out of the Spirit in the latter days. This is the part that Peter quotes, for it is this part which was fulfilled when the Feast of Firstfruits was fulfilled 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. What does this part say?

1. The Spirit Is for All Flesh, vv. 17-18

The Spirit is for all flesh, the text says. Peter adds "Says God" to make explicit what is always implicit in prophetic revelation. From Joel's perspective, the coming of the Spirit was future; from Peter's perspective, the coming of the Spirit was happening right in front of him. And just as he saw the tongues of fire go to every believer, so now he emphasizes that the Bible had already taught that such would be the case. The Spirit is for all flesh — in this case, we understand, for all flesh of God's servants, which is how the verse goes on to describe it.

Now, does the presence of the Spirit automatically imply prophecy, dreams, and visions? The text certainly mentions these things. Yet they have never been the mainstream experience of all Christians, or even most Christians. Rather, it is best to understand these things like the generalized "blood and fire and smoke" of the next verses. The Spirit comes and stays; the signs come and go. They are real enough, but they do not have the staying power of the Spirit. When you have the reality, you don't need the sign. When I'm married, I don't need my wife to wear a wedding dress every day so that I can know I'm actually married to her. We've dropped the sign because we have the thing signified.

2. The Spirit Signals the Arrival of the Last Days, v. 17

Not only is the Spirit for all of God's people; He is a sign of the last days. You see, Joel said simply "after this I will pour out my Spirit." But Peter paraphrased that as "in the last days." The general "times afterward" of Joel become, in Peter's preaching, a clear sign of the dawning of the end. This "eschatological" (as theologians call it) streak runs all through the New Testament. It is a thoroughly apocalyptic document, constantly urging us to make decisions about what really matters in light of the imminent end of the world. In this, of course, it is supremely realistic. How, you ask? Precisely because the end is near for each one of us. Yes, Jesus has not come back yet and He left for Heaven almost two millennia ago. But in that time, how many Christians have died and gone to be with Him? It is literally true that, as Peter would go on to write, "the end of

all things is at hand.” But it is even truer that the moment of your death is rapidly approaching, and to live as though you will never die is the supreme folly.

The New Testament describes the entire era after the Ascension as “the last days.” By this it means that God has no more major salvation-historical events on the calendar. We have experienced everything He was planning to happen before the end. Obviously He still has minor events, like the planting of this church or the conversion of your neighbor that you’ve been praying for. But the major event was the resurrection, in which nature’s cycle of birth, death, and rebirth was definitively broken by the irruption of the Age to Come and the power of Jesus’ indestructible life. That principle of indestructible life is now working itself out, and the final end of the world will be when Christ’s indestructible life has conquered the last enemy of itself — namely, death.

We live in the time between inauguration and consummation, the mixed-up time when the principle of indestructible life (who is the Holy Spirit) is loose and at work in the world, and yet death the destroyer of life is also at work in the world. How can resurrection life live alongside death? We don’t know. But we know that it does.

So the Spirit signals the coming of the last days. That is one of Peter’s points. It’s a subpoint, but a very important one.

3. The Spirit Signals the Coming of Judgment, vv. 19-20

You see, under that subpoint are two further truths: the Spirit signals the coming of judgment and the arrival of salvation. Both of these are end-time realities. Judgment will happen at the end, when the whole story has been told, when all your acts have been enacted. And salvation will be complete then too. But already the death and resurrection of Christ signals the completion of God’s wrath (judgment) and the finality of God’s salvation. Peter mentions the signs of judgment that Joel talked about.

Obviously these things are not good. Darkness, blood, fire, and smoke are far from being the things that we associate with good and wonderful things. Far from it. No; the coming of the Spirit with these dismal signs signals the coming of judgment. And in the last days, God judges. His final judgment is reserved for the end, but the coming of the Spirit is a signal to get ready. Nothing but your next breath stands between you and judgment; nothing but the return of Christ, which could be at any moment, stands between you and the end of the world.

4. The Spirit Signals the Arrival of Salvation, v. 21

But by the same token, the Spirit’s coming also signals the arrival of salvation. Huh? How is this possible? Because salvation and judgment are two sides of the same coin. That coin is the *presence of God*. God is here. He will save those who trust Him and damn those who fight Him. The same sun that melts butter hardens clay. The difference is not in God; it’s in the people in front of Him.

Because God is coming in His Spirit, He will save everyone who calls on His name. What does that mean? It does not mean merely saying “Lord, Lord!” Calling Him Lord means nothing without doing what He wants. To invoke His name truly is to ask Him to keep His promises — clearly, in this case, the promise of last-days salvation. To call on the name of the

LORD is a concept that first appears in Genesis ch. 4 and recurs throughout the rest of the Bible. It means relying on God's character and promises.

A name signifies something. There are certain individuals whose rock-solid integrity and reliability is so well-known that a simple mention of their name is enough to calm a situation or change an attitude. We have a judge in our congregation. Let's call him Morales. "Morales is going to handle that case."

Immediately, you can stop worrying about that case. Morales has got it. There is no need to worry; it will be judged justly. Well, imagine that you are thrown in the dock before Morales. To call on his name would be to say, "Are you Judge Morales, your honor?"

When he says, "I am," you respond:

"Your honor, your name is good. I know that if I lay the facts before you, you will judge justly in my case because of who you are and your commitment to the law."

Well, to call on God's name is to ask Him to be who He is. It is to reaffirm His identity and apply it to your particular situation. The ones who do that in this period of the last days will be blessed with salvation. God saves those who call on Him according to who He really is. Yelling at Him as the child abuser in the sky is not calling on His name. But trusting Him to be who He said He would be, and affirming that trust by prayer, is exactly how you get saved and how you stay saved.

Now, Peter stops quoting there. But I want to look at the next verse as well for just a moment here, because it describes so perfectly what happened: "For in mount Sion and in Jerusalem shall the saved one be as the Lord has said, and they that have glad tidings preached to them, whom the Lord has called" (Joe 2:32 LXE). That's the Greek version that Peter was using. It prophesies that in the last days the gospel will be preached in Jerusalem. That happened in this very Pentecost sermon!

B. Relevance: This Is the True Explanation of What You're Seeing, vv. 12-13

Well, Peter's first point is obviously relevant to the audience because it answers the question of what on earth is going on. How did these men from Galilee start speaking in other tongues? The answer is simple. God poured out His Holy Spirit on them, just as He said He would. You aren't looking at drunks; you're looking at the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Well, we don't have time this morning to look at the rest of Peter's sermon in-depth. Let me just point out to you the nature of the pivot. Peter started by announcing that the spectacle in front of his audience was the result of the coming of the Spirit. And then he appears to start over.

II. Jesus of Nazareth Is the Lord Who Brings Last-Days Salvation, vv. 21-32

How does Peter do this? What is the nature of the pivot from "Spirit and prophecy, as already predicted in Joel 2" to "Jesus of Nazareth?" Let me just say that if you can understand this pivot then you understand the essence of New Testament preaching. If you don't understand it, if it appears to you be nothing more than Peter saying "Hey, I've got a crowd here and so I might as well talk about what I want to talk about whether it has any relevance to what they're asking or not", then you are far from the spirit of the NT.

Why does Peter do this, going from the Spirit to Jesus like this? *Because of his fervent conviction that Jesus and the Spirit are united in a very important way!* Peter is not abusing the audience. He's not just randomly tacking Jesus on at the end of a discourse that ceases to be relevant as soon as Jesus is mentioned. Rather, he is backing up to give the deeper explanation of what happened. Yes, Joel prophesied it. But why did Joel prophesy it? Why did this event have to happen at all?

The answer, of course, lies in the identity and career of Jesus of Nazareth. The Spirit came because Jesus sent Him. And why did Jesus send Him? Because of who Jesus is and what He came to do. In other words, brothers and sisters, *if you think that Pentecost is about the Spirit then you need to stop reading Peter's sermon at v. 21.* But Pentecost is not about the Spirit. It is about Jesus, just as the Spirit Himself is about Jesus. That's why Peter backs up and says "You're interested in the symptoms here, which are a manifestation of the Holy Spirit of God. Well, let me tell you: The Holy Spirit didn't send Himself. Yes, He is God and perfectly capable of initiative and desire and action. But He is the Spirit of Jesus and He came from Jesus, for He proceeds from the Father and the Son, and with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified."

In other words, brothers and sisters, whatever our Pentecostal brothers and sisters say about the Spirit, we can affirm. He is all that and more, for He is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. Yet He did not come on His own account. He came to bear witness to Jesus. He is the Spirit of Jesus who came from Jesus for Jesus. That's where Peter winds up: The whole life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, for the sake of which the entire OT was written, culminates here and now in the glorious coming of the Spirit. Jesus poured this out. Yes, the Spirit is responsible, but behind Him stands the Logos. The Spirit proceeds from the Son.

So the coming of the Spirit signals the last days; of course it does. But the reason it signals the last days is that Jesus came and did what He did and so brought in the last days.

Do you believe that? Do you trust Him? If the answer is yes, then you share in His Spirit. If the Spirit and His fruits are AWOL in your life, then you don't yet know Jesus.

Joel prophesied that God would pour out the Spirit. What he didn't mention was that it was specifically the Son of God who would pour out the Spirit, having earned the right to do so by living, dying, and rising again. Peter now makes this clear.

Do you look to Jesus Christ as the source of the Spirit? Do you ask Him for His Spirit? Do you keep in step with the Spirit? Brothers and sisters, the Spirit is for all flesh, for every Christian. If you belong to Christ, His Spirit belongs to you. Live like it. Amen.