

Sermons in Acts: Spirit and Salvation

We're going to start a new series today, carrying on from our look at the meaning of the word "gospel" to a study of the sermons in the book of Acts. What did the early church actually preach to people - Jews and Gentiles - when they proclaimed the good news of Jesus Messiah? And we'll take these sermons in the order that they are given, starting with Peter's message on the Day of Pentecost described in Acts 2.

The setting: Jesus is gone now. He had walked with the disciples for as much as three years, had taught them and showed them the Kingdom of God, and they had seen Him arrested, knew that He had been executed on a Roman cross and then, incredibly, He had appeared to them alive again, spoke with them, ate with them, over a period of several weeks, and then, once more, He was gone. He had left them with a simple instruction: "Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you what He promised. Remember, I have told you about this before. John baptized with water, but in just a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

(Acts 1:4,5) So, those few followers, probably less than 200, waited in Jerusalem until the promised gift of the Holy Spirit came, and their wait was about 10 days.

At the beginning of chapter 2, we see the fulfillment of Jesus' promise:

On the day of Pentecost, seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection, the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm in the skies above them, and it filled the house where they were meeting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability. (Acts 2:1-4)

Pentecost was one of the Feast Days of Judaism, based on the Old Testament command in Leviticus to celebrate the harvest with thanksgiving (Lev. 23:15-16). According to Jewish tradition, the Feast of Pentecost coincided with the time when God gave the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Being one of the days when pilgrims would come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast and to worship at the temple, there was a large crowd of Jews from many countries gathered on that Pentecost. And when the Spirit fell on the believers and they began to speak in the languages of the nations, and when they spilled out into the streets, proclaiming the praises of God in all these languages, it got some attention. Acts 2:6 says that the people in Jerusalem from all these other countries came running to see what this was all about and verses 7 and 8 tell us that they noted that the speakers were from Galilee, but that they were speaking about the wonderful things God had done in the languages of the Parthians, the Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, the peoples of Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Crete and Arabia. While most of them were just confused and amazed, a few threw out the theory that the speakers were just drunk, and that was Peter's cue to address the crowds:

Listen carefully, all of you, fellow Jews and residents of Jerusalem! Make no mistake about this. Some of you are saying these people are drunk. It isn't true! It's much too early for that. People don't get drunk by nine o'clock in the morning. No, what you are seeing this morning was predicted centuries ago by the prophet Joel:

"In the last days, God said I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. In those days I will pour out my Spirit upon all My servants, men and women alike, and they will prophesy. And I will cause wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below - blood and fire and clouds of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon will turn bloodred, before that great and glorious day of the Lord arrives. And anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Acts 2:14-21)

Let's stop there for this week and look at the early verses of Peter's sermon. These are verses we tend to skip over because we don't really understand what Joel was talking about and we don't see how it *all* applies to what the Jews in Jerusalem were experiencing that day. But Peter asks them to listen carefully, to make no mistake about what's going on. He says, on the one hand, that the people aren't drunk and then, on the other hand, he points to the words of the prophet Joel.

The message is, in it's shortest form:

1. This experience is the fulfillment of God's promise in Joel to pour out His Spirit on ALL people, and
2. Anyone, who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

The Holy Spirit was no stranger to the writings of the Old Testament, the Jewish Scriptures. He was active from the time of creation - you read about Him in Genesis 1:2 - then all through the history of Israel. For example, it was the Spirit who gave the gifts of artistic skill to Bezalel so that he could build the tabernacle of God in the wilderness after the Exodus (Ex. 31:3). And it was the Spirit who gave super strength to Samson, enabling him to defeat the Philistines. But the workings of the Holy Spirit were limited to a few people, on a few occasions, for a limited period of time. There was the promise, but not yet the experience, of the Spirit falling on ALL people. Peter says that that promise found in the writings of the prophet Joel, is now being fulfilled.

But what about all the strange language in between the beginning of Joel's prophecy and the promise at the end that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved? Blood, fire, clouds of smoke, the darkening of the sun and the moon turning bloodred - these seem to suggest that a major physical catastrophe is about to come to earth. But if we look back into the Old Testament and see how those images were used in the literature of the day, we come up with a different picture.

Let's look at Isaiah 13 - I'll read a few select verses from the chapter and then comment:

Isaiah son of Amoz received this message concerning the destruction of Babylon: (v.1) Hear the noise on the mountains! Listen, as the armies march! It is the noise and the shout of many nations. Yahweh Almighty has brought them here to

form an army. (v. 4) For see, the day of Yahweh is coming - the terrible day of His fury and fierce anger. The heavens will be black above them. No light will shine from the star or sun or moon. (vv. 9a,10)

The whole context of this passage is God's judgment on Babylon. What it describes is a massive overthrow of the dominant power in the Middle East in that day - not the end of the world, but a major shift in power. Let's look at another text:

Son of Man, mourn for Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and give him this message: You think of yourself as a strong young lion among the nations, but you are really just a sea monster, heaving around in your own rivers, stirring up mud with your feet. Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says, "I will send many people to catch you in My net and haul you out of the water ... (Ezekiel 32:2,3) When I blot you out, I will veil the heavens and darken the stars. I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give you its light. (32:7)

Again, the language of the blotting out of the bright lights in the heavens is symbolic of the blotting out of lights here on earth, the ending of empires, the judgment of nations that have rejected God's purposes. This is the very same language that Jesus uses in Matthew and Mark to describe the overthrow of the Jewish nation after they had rejected Him and which was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

The significance of this imagery in Peter's speech in Acts is that it is describing a major change, a huge shift in God's dealings with human beings. No longer will He be present just on occasion, filling people with His Spirit in times of great need, but He is coming to live with His people on an individual and a permanent basis. Back to Joel's prophecy: "In the last days I will pour out My Spirit on ALL people - your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams." This is the new and radical announcement that Peter is making in this first sermon of Acts: a new age has come and it is the age of the Spirit. God is present with all His people, and not just with a few of them. This is even more significant than the fall of Babylon or God's judgment on Egypt - this is earth-shaking news of a new day in God's salvation history.

Why do I say "salvation history"? Because of the verse which follows this powerful description of the signs that indicate God's works in history:

And anyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved. (2:21)

This is so radical, so new, that Peter is emphasizing its significance in strong and clear language:

- I will pour out My Spirit on ALL people
- ANYONE who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved

This is a new day, Peter is saying. This is not like the things you have grown used to in your study of Scripture or in the traditions you have been observing. This is the new day of God's favor and it is inclusive of all who want it, all who make room in their hearts for God. Salvation is for those who call on the Name of Jesus, who look to Him as their hope and their King and its available to everyone.

Notice that Peter hasn't mentioned Jesus yet, hasn't talked about the trial, crucifixion and resurrection that has set all this in motion - he'll get to that in the rest of the sermon. But what gets people's attention is this outpouring of the Spirit, the ability of these Galilean fishermen to tell of God's wonderful works in the native tongues of North Africa, Arabia, Asia Minor and others. This is often how God works: He draws attention to Himself through a miracle of some kind, and this opens the door for those who know Him to explain His power and grace to others.

Now, let's go through the talk again, this time looking for clues as to what Peter is seeing, what he is responding to as he addresses the crowds that have come running up to see what's going on.

1. The first thing he does is call for people's careful and thoughtful response to what they are witnessing. He sees that the majority are just confused, that they have no idea what's happening and that they need an explanation. But he doesn't start by offering that explanation, but by calling them to get serious. Basically, he's saying that the explanation he is about to give is important information, not to be taken lightly, and so he asks them to listen carefully.
2. The second thing he responds to is the fringe crowd, those who want to treat it lightly, to blow it all off as the evidence of people who have had too much to drink. These are the mockers, the ones who deal with things by making a joke about them, pretending they know something that they don't. And Peter puts them in their place by saying, "Come on, people don't get drunk by nine in the morning! Be reasonable."
3. The third thing he does is make a connection for them between what they are witnessing and what they already believe. They are seeing something happen right in front of them that they don't understand and Peter tells them, "This is what Joel said would happen." They would know the prophets, would be familiar with the words of Joel and would find a level of comfort in knowing that this confusion they are seeing is actually part of the promise of God. Suddenly, they are made alert to the fact that this isn't chaos, but has profound meaning and deep significance for their faith.

Do you see what has happened in just a few sentences? The people have gone from confusion or possibly from mocking, and are being drawn into the big picture of God's promises and plan of salvation. No wonder Peter told them to listen carefully, to "make no mistake about this!" Peter has prepared them for the message he is about to bring and he does it by asking for their careful attention, by responding to the flippant or foolish attitude of those hardest to reach, and by making a connection for them between what they are seeing and something they have trusted for years, words from their sacred Scriptures. These are principles for telling people good news about Jesus that we can apply as well.

1. We can ask for people to give us time to explain what we believe, what we have experienced and why we think it's important.

2. We can anticipate their objections and offer to answer their questions, whether we can right there on the spot, or if we need to look them up and answer them later.
3. We can make connections between what they already believe to be true and what the Scripture says. That will be harder in our day than it was in Peter's first talk, because his audience was convinced of the truth and importance of Scripture. But we can talk from our own personal experience, which has authority, we can use the testimony of scientists and experts in various fields who have researched the issues and become followers of Jesus, and we can appeal to the well-recognized disciplines of historical research that show us clearly that Jesus lived, that He was executed for blasphemy and that He rose again from the dead. Those are the best explanations that we have for the historical data that have come down to us.

The next question that comes to my mind as I'm going through this talk is, "Why did Peter choose this particular passage to quote from Joel and what was he wanting the listeners to get hold of?" He could have chosen Isaiah, who wrote in a couple of places about the pouring out of the Spirit. He could have chosen Ezekiel 36:26,27 where God promises to take out our heart of stone and to fill us with His Spirit. So why did he choose Joel?

1. Joel majors on the wideness of God's mercy, telling us that the Spirit will be poured out on all people. That was a key part of what Peter wanted to communicate: that this is important news for everyone!
2. The second reason I suspect Peter used this passage is because it uses the language of radical change. As we've seen, the language of signs among the sun, moon and stars signals a shock to the global system of power. Things that seemed like they might go on forever are brought to their knees and new, unexpected realities take their place. Two of those radical changes are made explicit in these verses. The first is that men and women are equal recipients of the Spirit. "Your sons and daughters will prophesy", "I will pour out My Spirit upon all My servants, men and women alike." The second sea change is signaled in v. 21: "And anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." This is not subtle - the anyone must include Gentiles as well as Jews. This promise is not stated as one that is reserved for the people of Israel, those who had historically been the chosen ones, but is now open to all. So, Joel readies the Jewish world for radical change, Jesus opens the door for it and the Holy Spirit brings it on the Day of Pentecost.
3. The third reason I think Peter chose this passage is because it includes the promise of salvation which would become central to the proclamation of the early church. Joel didn't stop with the verse that Peter stopped with. Joel went on to describe "survivors", people who "escape" from calamity. But Peter stops with the simple promise of salvation: "Any anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." This is where he breaks off from the expectations that were raised by the prophet Joel and starts introducing the gospel that he will now proclaim about the triumph of Jesus over death and the salvation He brings.

For us to share our faith with people, although there are many ways to go about it, I think Peter offers us some principles for how to do it well.

1. Major on the wideness of God's mercy, that He wants to welcome people from every tribe, tongue & nation.
2. Tell people that what God has done in Jesus is radically different than anything humans had ever known before. The gospel we talk about is not religion, it's not all about doing better, living more fulfilled lives, being nicer people - it's more like opening a door into joy and peace that goes beyond anything we could ever imagine.
3. God's verdict on the human condition is that we need salvation. The gospel is good news from God, that He has provided the way for that salvation through what Jesus has done on the cross. Our response is not difficult, not complex; it's simply to call on the name of the Lord. "Jesus, I need You. Please give me Your gift of forgiveness and fill me with Your Holy Spirit!" If there is anyone here who has never done that, never called on the name of the Lord, I invite you to do that now, to put your hope for the future into His hands, to trust Him to lead you and care for you for the rest of your life and then welcome you into His heaven, to be with Him there forever.