

Acts 2: Peter's Pentecost Sermon

Setting of the sermon. Acts 2-7 contains *two* important matters. In terms of *divine purpose*, the church is formed in Acts 2. In terms of *human responsibility*, an appeal is still being made to Israel to repent, first by *Peter* (2.38, 40; 3.19) then *Stephen* (Acts 7). The nation had rejected God the **Father** as He spoke to them through the prophets in OT days. They had also rejected the testimony of the incarnate **Son of God** in their very midst! Now, the witness of the **Spirit** was being presented through the preaching of the apostles. All this was necessary to prove conclusively that God must now leave the nation and move out to the Gentiles.

Subject of the sermon. The preaching contains several *key* themes:

- **Saviour** or Messiah. The whole aim of Peter's preaching was to prove to the house of Israel that *Jesus of Nazareth*, whom they had crucified, had been raised from the dead and made, in position, Lord and Christ. The presence of the Spirit of God in their midst proved the case (v.36; John 7.39).
- **Scriptures.** As a sermon to the Jews, the preaching must contain the evidence of Scripture. **42%** of the message is direct quotation from the OT including *Joel 2* (vv.17-21), *Psalms 16* (vv.25-28) and *Psalms 110* (vv.34-35). There are also allusions to *Psalms 132* and *2 Samuel 7* (v.30). It is interesting that, when speaking to Gentiles in Acts 10, Peter does not quote from *any* OT scriptures, apart from to say, "to him give all the prophets witness" (v.43). Paul follows the same pattern, quoting liberally from Scripture to a *Jewish* audience (Acts 13), but not at all to the philosophical *Gentiles* of Athens (Acts 17). Clearly the apostles had an acute awareness of their audience and tailored their preaching accordingly.
- **Sovereignty of God.** The name of "God" is used nine times in the sermon (cf. 2.17, 22-24). Peter is clearly emphasising that all the events of Calvary and Pentecost were *foreknown* and *foreordained* in the purpose of God. This did not, however, absolve the Jews from personal guilt and human responsibility.
- **Salvation.** Although the word salvation only occurs *three* times in the chapter (vv.21, 40, 47), the great thrust of Peter's preaching is to engender a sense of personal responsibility in relation to the specific sin of crucifying the Messiah (vv.23, 37). Yet, by the grace of God, "remission" was freely to be received in Christ (v.38).

Structure of the sermon

1. *Explanation* of the strange events of Pentecost by the *prophet* Joel (vv.14-21)
2. *Evidence* of the Messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth (vv.22-36)
 - His **Person** (vv.22-24). In Life (v.22). In Death (v.23). In Resurrection (v.24)
 - **Psalm** (vv.25-31). Peter *states* the Psalm (vv.25-28) then *interprets* the significance of the Psalm (vv.29-31)
 - **Personal** Testimony of the Apostles (v.32)
 - **Presence** of Spirit (vv.33-35). Christ in the *place* of honour (vv.33-34), *patiently* waiting (v.35)
3. *Exhortation* to repentance and baptism (vv.36-40).

Explanation of the Events of Pentecost [vv.14-21]

v.14: Peter first *addresses* the crowd (v.14) before *dismissing* the charge of drunkenness (v.15) and *drawing* on the prophecy of Joel to explain the sign of tongues (vv.16-21). Remarkably, it is Peter, the denier, who raises his voice to preach. Fifty days earlier had been shut away with the other disciples for fear of the Jews; now he has been "endued with power from on high"! The phrase "and said" employs a rare Greek word (x3 in NT) meaning to 'declare openly' or literally 'sound out'. Significantly the same word is used of the Spirit-inspired utterance in the upper room (v.4), suggesting Peter is likewise preaching by inspiration. Peter addresses himself to the "men of Judea", literally 'men, Jews', not necessarily *permanent* dwellers in Judea, but those of Jewish heritage. Those who "dwell at Jerusalem" (Israel's spiritual centre) takes in all others besides native-born Jews such as proselytes. **v.15:** On a feast day, Jews abstained from "wine" until at least 10am (after the morning sacrifice) or even 12pm (after synagogue prayers had ended). The sign of tongues was therefore a matter of *inspiration*, not *intoxication*!

v.16: The quotation from Joel 2 is contextually located after a locust plague had ravaged the land of Israel causing widespread famine. The prophecy presents a call to repentance, promising restoration of prosperity and the ultimate dawn of the Messianic age when the Spirit would be 'poured out'. In quoting Joel 2, Peter says "this is that". There are *three* views as to exactly what Peter meant:

- **Total** fulfilment. Acts 2 was the *complete* and *final* fulfilment of Joel's prophecy. This view requires the spiritualisation of the supernatural signs of vv.19-20 and often advocates their fulfilment at Calvary or in AD70.
- **No** fulfilment. In this view Peter is merely saying the events of Acts 2 were *illustrative* of, or *like* the prophecy of Joel. However, the language of Peter throughout seems to demand more than this.

- **Preliminary** or ‘near’ fulfilment. This suggests that Pentecost *fulfils* Joel’s prediction, but does not exhaust it. This is therefore ‘a’ fulfilment but not ‘the’ fulfilment. This is stage one, a kind of *firstfruits* or *foretaste* of the outpouring of the last days. It is no doubt significant that *three* items belong to the “last days”. The *Spirit* is poured out (vv.17-18), supernatural *signs* are seen (vv.19-20) and *salvation* is enjoyed (v.21). Peter develops the *first* (v.33) and *third* (v.38), but not the *second* – it has a future fulfilment.

Spirit poured out (vv.17-18). By inspiration of the Spirit, Peter has changed “afterward” (Joel 2.28) to “in the last days”. The “last days” or “last times” as relating to the **church** began with the advent of Christ (1 Peter 1.20) and have special reference to declension at the end of this age (cf. 2 Timothy 3.1; 2 Peter 3.3). The Spirit is the signal indicating the end time era had arrived. Last days as related to **Israel**, are days of her exaltation and blessing (Isaiah 2.2-4) including the great age of Messianic fulfilment.

“Saith God” is added by Peter to his quotation of Joel 2. This is highly significant to emphasise that the outpouring of the Spirit comes from **God** – a point which prepares the hearers for the conclusion of the message where it is “Jesus” exalted at the right hand of God who has “shed forth this” – He must therefore be God (vv.32-33)! The word “pour” expresses a copious, freely abundant supply. The image is that of a torrential downpour. The Spirit would be poured out on “all flesh” without distinction of sex, age or social standing (v.18). This is a gift offered indiscriminately to all. This was predicted in connection with Israel’s last days in both *Isaiah* (32.15; 44.3) and *Ezekiel* (39.29) as well as *Joel*. Only Joel adds “all flesh”. This does not describe all humanity, but a repentant remnant of the children of Zion (Joel 2.23), though it could be wider here to embrace Gentiles.

Evidence of the outpouring of the Spirit would come in the form of “prophecy” – words of revelation from God to men (cf. Acts 11.27; 13.1; 15.32; 19.6) and “visions”, a vehicle of divine revelation by day or night (dreams), cf. Ananias (Acts 9.10), Peter (Acts 10.3) and Paul (Acts 16.9). This outpouring would come on the lowest ranks of society, even “on my (God’s) servants” and “handmaidens” (female servants).

Supernatural signs (vv.19-20). The “great and notable (glorious) day of the Lord” (v.20) appears to be a particular point within the day of the Lord, specifically, the advent of Christ. This is the great day of direct, divine intervention. It will be heralded by judgment and “wonders” (something that astounds) in *heaven* above and “signs” in the *earth* beneath. On earth, there will be the signs of “blood” (emblem of slaughter and battle), “fire” (image of war), and “vapour” (describing rising columns or pillars of smoke). In heaven, there will be the wonder of the sun “turned into darkness”. Each judgment of Revelation ends with an earthquake, suggesting a high level of tectonic and volcanic activity which would likely fill the atmosphere with ash and darken the sun. The “moon” shall ‘not give her light’ (Matthew 24.29) and become blood red in colour.

Salvation (v.21). In Joel, ‘salvation’ signifies deliverance from impending judgment and doom in the day of the Lord. The “call” is directed toward Jehovah. Significantly, the “Lord” in Acts 2 is the risen Christ (v.36). He is Jehovah Jesus (cp. Isaiah 45.23, Philippians 2.10). To “call” is to recognise one’s danger and cry in faith to the Deliverer, trusting His power to save. The “name” represents the Person. This is an expression of total *faith in* and *loyalty to* the Lord and Christ at God’s right hand.

Evidence of the Messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth [vv.22-35]

The main theme of Peter’s message is found in his concluding statement, “*Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ*” (v.36). In this section (vv.22-35) he presents **four** strands of evidence to substantiate the claim.

Evidence of His Person (vv.22-24). In three short verses Peter elucidates the *life* (v.22), *death* (v.23) and *resurrection* (v.24) of the Lord Jesus. “Jesus of Nazareth” (x17 in NT) or “Jesus Christ of Nazareth” (Acts 3.6; 4.10) was a lowly name as one associated with despised Nazareth. It demonstrates the humility and rejection of the Messiah and was part of the inscription above the cross (John 19.19). In wonderful grace, this was also the name the Lord Jesus used of Himself in exalted glory when speaking to Saul of Tarsus (Acts 22.8). Though Jesus of Nazareth was regarded as unworthy by men, he was “approved of God”, a word meaning to *clearly attest* or *exhibit* the quality of something or someone. This was accomplished by “miracles” (acts of power), “wonders” (describing the marvelling effect of these miracles on others), and “signs” (miracles pointing to a deeper spiritual meaning). The source of these miracles was God Himself, who performed them “by” or through (*dia*) the agency of the Lord Jesus. He was truly sent by God. And all this was in their “midst” – publicly among them. There could be no claim to ignorance. There was no excuse.

v.23: Peter presents the *death* of Christ from the standpoints of divine sovereignty *and* human responsibility – they are not mutually exclusive! Indeed, God superintends man’s wickedness and uses it to achieve His own purpose. Christ was “delivered”, *handed* or *given over* according to the will of God. Whilst it is true Christ was delivered up by *Judas* (Matthew 26.15), *Pontius Pilate* (Matthew 27.26), the *nation* itself (Acts 3.13) and of His *own volition* (Galatians 2.20), the thought here concerns God’s eternal purpose (cf. Romans 8.32). Christ was delivered by “the determinate (*horizo*) counsel” and “foreknowledge” of God. These are not one and the same thing. Foreknowledge simply means to ‘know beforehand’ and describes a divine *attribute* (omniscience) rather than an *act*. This is therefore describing a determined purpose (intention) the boundaries of which were marked out in a fully pre-arranged and foreseen plan. But divine sovereignty does not absolve an individual’s personal guilt, for **they** had “taken” Him. *Luke 22.22: And truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed!* It was through the agency of “wicked (lawless) hands”, referring to Gentile Roman soldiers (cf. Acts 4.26-28), that they had “crucified and slain” the Messiah. The Greek is emphatic, “by means of having Him crucified, **you all** killed!” **v.24:** Yet God had raised Him from the dead. Borrowing language from Psalm 18, Christ was “loosed” (liberated) of the “pains of death”, the word ‘pain’ referring to labour pains (symbolising what is agonising). In this picture, the tomb was like a womb out of which Christ came forth in resurrection life. But there may be a mixed metaphor here. In Psalm 18, the imagery is that of death as a hunter catching and binding his victims with nooses and cords. *Psalm 18.5: The bands of Sheol surrounded me [JND]*. In resurrection, Christ breaks the cords of death and rises victoriously from the grave. Indeed, it was “not possible” that death could hold Him. It was not possible *personally* (He is the Son of God and in Him is life), *morally* (in Him is no sin) or *prophetically*, as Peter is about to show.

Evidence of the Psalm (vv.25-31). Peter first *states* the Psalm (vv.25-28) then *interprets* the significance of the Psalm (vv.29-31). **v.25:** This quotation is from Psalm 16 which expresses David’s *commitment* to, and *confidence* in God, even in death. But, as an inspired prophet, he was writing beyond his experience for David spoke “concerning Him”, that is, Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah. Christ alone could say with confidence, “I have set the Lord always before me”. His Father was His constant and near companion on whom He depended (Isaiah 50.4). He was ever mindful of His God and His glory, giving priority to Him in thought and action. His God was ever on His “right hand”, the place of protection and support. Consequently, Christ would “not be moved” or shaken. There was a rock-like stability that opposition, persecution or even death could never shake. **v.26:** Therefore He “rejoices” (*present* tense). He knew He would be preserved amidst coming sorrows. Even the prospect of the cross could not dampen the joy of Christ (Hebrews 12.2). In addition, His “flesh” (physical body) would “rest **in** hope”, or literally, ‘tabernacle (to pitch a tent) **on** hope’. This is a statement of confident expectation. Should He be called to go into death, He was sure of being raised to life. **v.27:** This confidence is now explained. His “soul” (speaking of the whole person) would not be “left” (abandoned) “in” or better ‘unto’ (*eis*) “hell” (hades). *Hades* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Sheol* and can refer to the grave *or* death. Thus, Christ would not be abandoned to the grave or remain captive to death. The “Holy One” *would* and *could* never experience “corruption” (decay). The Hebrew word translated “Holy One” is elsewhere translated ‘saints’ or ‘godly’ referring to a sanctified person. Here it is used as a Messianic title (cf. Mark 1.24; Luke 4.34; John 6.69; Acts 3.14). This verse is often used in discussions about the location of Christ between His death and resurrection. There shouldn’t be room for much debate! The Lord Jesus told the malefactor that he would be “with Him” in “Paradise” that very day (Luke 23.43). The NT only refers to Paradise on *two* other occasions, both of which clearly locate Paradise in heaven (2 Corinthians 12.4; Revelation 2.7). In addition, the Lord Jesus committed His spirit into the hands of His Father at death (Luke 23.46). There seems little reason to doubt, therefore, that the Lord Jesus was in heaven between his death and resurrection. This does not mean there were *two* ascensions, as ascension requires *bodily* resurrection. **v.28:** Psalm 16.11 reads, “Thou wilt shew me the path of life” in the *future* tense. Here, the quotation is rendered in the *past* tense for Christ *had been* restored to life! There is now “fulness of joy” for the Saviour in the presence of God. Peter omits “at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore”, but he will yet emphasise this place of favour and honour in v.33.

v.29: Having stated the Psalm, Peter will now interpret its significance for his hearers. With *confidence* (boldness) and *clarity* he presses the point – David was dead and buried (over 1,000 years ago). In fact, his “sepulchre” (burial chamber) was still with them¹, proving he had experienced death and decay. He was not resurrected *before* decay! Who, then, was David speaking of? **v.30:** Was he misguided? No, David was a “prophet” and the Spirit of the LORD spoke through him (cf. 2 Samuel 23.2). Instead, God had made a solemn promise to David that the throne of his kingdom would be established forever in a physical descendant, which promise found *near* fulfilment in Solomon and *far* fulfilment in

¹ *David’s tomb was mentioned as part of the description of the reconstruction of Jerusalem’s wall after the Jews returned from Exile (Nehemiah 3.16). According to 1 Kings 2.10, David was buried “in the City of David,” on Zion, the hill south of the temple, in the eastern section of Jerusalem. King Herod attempted to raid David’s tomb because he needed money, but was stopped when flames killed two guards, prompting Herod to build a memorial of white marble at the entrance of the tomb. The tomb and monument were not destroyed until Hadrian in AD133.*

Christ (Psalm 132.11; 2 Samuel 7.12-13; cf. Romans 1.3). Later manuscripts add, as per the AV, “he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne”. In light of 2 Samuel 7, the ‘raising up’ here likely refers to the birth of Christ. But, given His death, resurrection would be necessary if He were to sit on David’s throne! It should be emphasised that Christ is not yet seated on David’s throne – this is an *earthly* throne which He will occupy in the millennium (Isaiah 9.7; Luke 1.32). He is presently seated on His Father’s throne (cf. v.34; Revelation 3.21) *until* His enemies are defeated (v.35). **v.31:** David was therefore not speaking of himself, but the Messiah. It was only through resurrection a son of David could rule forever. The significant quotation from Psalm 16 is repeated with *two* changes from v.27. The tense has been changed from *future* to *aorist* – this is the historical fact that Christ was not, nor ever could be, abandoned to the grave *or* experience corruption. The “Holy One” is changed to “his flesh” (cf. v.26) to emphasise the wonder of his bodily resurrection.

Evidence of Personal Testimony (v.32). In referring to “this Jesus”, Peter is showing that what was predicted of the Messiah is true in the case of the Lord Jesus. And the apostles were all eyewitnesses of His resurrection, including Matthias (Acts 1.22). Such was the reality of the resurrection of Christ, *all* the apostles were willing to testify to death to endorse the truth. The Greek word for “witness” is *martus*, from which we derive the English *martyr*.

Evidence of the Presence of the Spirit (vv.33-35). The descent of the Spirit of God on this very day of Pentecost proved that Christ had taken the *place* of honour at God’s right hand (vv.33-34) and was *patiently* waiting “until” His enemies be made His footstool (v.35). *John 7.39: Holy Spirit was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.* **v.33:** Christ is “by the right hand of God exalted” which could mean He was exalted *by* the power of God, **or** *to* the right hand of God, the latter being more likely in the light of Psalm 110.1 (cf. Acts 5.31). The “right hand” is the place of honour and authority (Exodus 15.6). *Benoni* (son of my sorrow) has become *Benjamin* (son of my right hand)! As such, Christ has secured “the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father” (NET) which is ‘poured out’ by the ascended Christ (Luke 24.49; John 15.26). This is a most significant statement. “He”, that is Jesus, has “shed forth” (poured out) the Spirit, the evidence of which all could see and hear. He must therefore be, not only Messiah, but **God**, for, according to Joel (quoted in v.17), it was **God** who would pour out the Spirit. **v.34:** In a reference to Psalm 110, Peter further proves *where* Christ is and explains *why* He is not yet reigning on David’s throne. Though these statements were written *by* David, they were not written *about* him! David did not “ascend into the heavens” as Christ has, for this requires bodily resurrection. Psalm 110 reveals Messiah as both David’s son *and* David’s Lord – He is **both** a physical descendant of David (man) *and* His Lord (God). “The LORD (*Jehovah*) said unto my Lord (*Adon*)” – Jehovah is speaking to *another* person that David considered his superior and sovereign – thus, two members of the Godhead (Father and Son) are conversing. The Lord Jesus used this scripture to confound the Pharisees in Matthew 22.41-46. They could not understand how the Messiah could be both David’s Lord *and* David’s son. Upon His ascension, Christ was invited to “sit” at the right hand of God. In Judaism, it was not possible for a person to sit in the presence of God – this Scripture therefore demonstrates the equality of the Son. **v.35:** In view of the birth of the church (divine purpose), there must be an *interval* of grace between Messiah’s exaltation and the subjugation of His enemies at His second coming. But, at the appointed time, the King will be manifested in power and His enemies will be made the footstool of His feet.