

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Good news that changed Cities: Jerusalem - Acts 2:1-47

Good morning and, if it is not too cruel, perhaps I can start by asking you a question and hope that you are awake enough to be able to think! When was the first time you met your spouse and what were you doing? Or when did you first start work or school and what was your first day like? And do you remember the first time you were really ill - not just a head cold and cough, but something really debilitating? I guess some people would be able to answer all three questions very quickly and confidently. Perhaps like me, you would just shrug and say that you couldn't remember, either because the memory is not what it once was, or because the day was not all that remarkable in the first place! Over the next few weeks, we will be looking at six cities and the day when the Gospel first came to each of them. We shall look at the key ideas contained in the preaching of the Gospel and how it varied at each place and look at the different ways in which the Gospel was preached to suit the listeners in each city. This morning we will look at the Gospel as it was preached in Jerusalem. We read about this in Acts 2.

To help us learn the lessons of this chapter we will look at:

- The power in the Gospel;
- The prophecy in the Gospel;
- The preaching of the Gospel; and finally
- The purpose of the Gospel.

The Power in the Gospel

So let us start with the power in the Gospel and read together Acts 2:1-13:

"When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. Then they were all amazed and marvelled, saying to one another, 'Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God.' So they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'Whatever could this mean?' Others mocking said, 'They are full of new wine.'"

As we begin our journey around the six cities, we need to understand that the Gospel is terrific news good news to the world of all that God has done and who He is. And it is primarily His work. God will always have His witness in this world, and even if we remain silent, He will speak through others, but we will miss out on the blessing of being used by Him. I can look around my situation and think wouldn't it be a good idea if we had a men's breakfast and a teens group and a summer camp for children and an OAP's luncheon and a hundred more ideas. But unless it is what He asks me to do, then it will all be hot air and useless activity. Solomon could say, *"Unless the LORD builds the house, they labour in vain who build it"* (Psalm 127:1). Imagine that! The glory and splendour of the temple was nothing unless it was in the plans of God. We need to constantly cultivate the habit of daily praying, *"Lord, what will You have me to do?"* (Acts 9:6). Here, as the Gospel comes to Jerusalem, it is important to note that it did not start with Peter preaching but with the working of the Holy Spirit. The devout inhabitants of Jerusalem knew that something was happening because they heard the movement of the Holy Spirit. Now the circumstance of Acts 2 were unique, and will not be the norm to be copied today, but the principle is right that God is always at work first, often long before He involves us in that work.

I am involved in a Christian ministry that encourages Christians in the UK to study the Word of God. However, the roots of this work started in the Congo as a tool for missionaries to reach native villages! That is quite a journey, but then God often uses something done for Him in one way to achieve some apparently unconnected result somewhere

else. Perhaps you were discouraged after giving out tracts when nobody came to the event you were inviting them to, little realising that someone read it and was saved and has now returned to his home country and been used of the Lord to bring over 5,000 souls to salvation! We just do not know how God will use what is done for Him, and we don't need to know, because it is His work and He is in charge.

The Holy Spirit, indwelling each believer, lies at the heart of all that is done for Him. So it was here in Jerusalem. On this Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes upon the timid and confused disciples and makes them bold and fearless. This reminds me that God has far more to do in me than through me! Until the Gospel has a transforming effect upon me, then I am not ready to share that with others. And this indwelling by the Holy Spirit was for the blessing of others, not to draw attention to the disciples and make them look good. If we look at a preacher and make a head count of converts, or a church and measure numbers on the register, then we have totally missed the point. The disciples were able to speak in languages that they had never learned, not so that they could look clever, but so that folk from those countries could hear about the Lord Jesus. Now my son has gone to live in Norway. After four months he has picked up a basic vocabulary and can put together short and specific sentences. But here were the disciples speaking fluently and boldly in foreign languages instantaneously. Not only the words but the message was miraculously given to them, and it was because God was already at work.

The Prophecy in the Gospel

Now let us look at the prophecy in the Gospel in Acts 2:14-21: *"But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, 'Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy. I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: blood and fire and vapour of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."'"*

Although we will not look specifically at the words of the prophecy, I think there are two important points to make concerning the way Peter goes about preaching the Gospel. But before we look at these, it is also worth just making a general comment. It is important to note that Pentecost was not the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy! (Quoted from Joel 2:28-32). Many times in the New Testament, particularly where the life of the Lord Jesus was concerned, we get the words *"that the Scripture might be fulfilled"* or something similar (for example John 17:12, John 19:24, John 19:28). The Holy Spirit inspired the New Testament writer to recognise that what he was writing about was the fulfilment of the promise of God in the Old Testament. Now Peter does not say this, and the Holy Spirit certainly would not inspire him to write such, as the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy awaits a coming national Jewish revival. What Peter says is that what the crowd was witnessing was like what Joel had said about the Spirit's work in a day yet to come. There would be no doubt in the future that it was indeed the Holy Spirit of God that was prompting a revival. Well, here on the day of Pentecost, these men were acting in exactly the same way, and for the same reason - they were moved by the same Spirit of God!

So what do we learn from Acts 2:14-21?

Firstly, the first time the Gospel was preached it began with what God had said in the Bible! There is no room for human invention in the Gospel - it is His salvation that we preach, His Word, His work. Too often, all too often, we add our own thoughts and interpretations into our preaching and then run the risk of preaching error. Particularly if you are a young preacher, never be afraid of starting with reading the Bible and quoting from it throughout your message. It is His word that will bring life! However, don't read too much so that your congregation has no idea what is coming, and lose interest. Peter selectively quotes from the book of Joel to make his point - he didn't read the whole book!

Secondly, the future, as well as the past is entirely known to God. We are engaged in the Gospel and we have no idea what will be accomplished. Sometimes we may see little outward result from our service and become discouraged. Is it worth it? Well, if we are doing what the Lord has called us to, then the answer to those questions of doubt is a resounding 'Yes'! When God inspired Joel to prophesy, Joel could never have imagined the day when what he was saying would come true, and yet it will. Now as Peter starts his preaching, he could have had no idea what God was going to accomplish through those tiny beginnings - just a crowd in Jerusalem! And yet here we are 2,000 years later and the Gospel has gone worldwide to billions. But what could never have been envisaged by Peter was entirely known to God. In John 10:16, Jesus had said, *"And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd."* The history of the church, from Pentecost to the Rapture, is fully known to God. So we ought to find encouragement in knowing that whilst we may not understand our part in the Gospel, if we are following His calling, all we do for Him will find its part and purpose in building His Church.

The preaching of the Gospel

Thirdly we shall consider the preaching of the Gospel in Acts 2:22-40: *“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know - Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it. For David says concerning Him: “I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of joy in Your presence.” Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: ‘The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’ Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.’ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’ Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.’ And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation.”*

Notice again how frequently Peter makes reference to the Bible in what he has to preach! It really is all about what God says. Visual aids maybe helpful, witty stories engage the listener and real life stories help fix the message in the mind. These are good things in the Gospel. But we must never make them the point of the Gospel. It is His Word that we need every time we speak for Him! And we cannot speak it if we have never read it and don't know and understand it. So the preacher must have spent time studying the word and understanding what he is talking about. That is not to say that God cannot use the simplest Christian. Jesus Himself often told those whom He had healed to go home and tell others about what Jesus had done for them. That will always be a vital element in the Gospel. But we ought never to make that an excuse for being sloppy and lazy as we prepare to share the Gospel - whether that is formally preaching or in personal witness.

It is instructive to us to notice that Peter is very wise in his preaching. Here he is in Jerusalem, the capital city of David, Israel's greatest king and so he chooses to refer to what David has said as he proclaims the gospel. Not only that, but in referring to their national hero, he shows that Jesus is incomparably greater than David. Do you see what he is doing? He starts with a point of common interest, something that his listeners would naturally be interested in and feel good about so that he can engage their interest. This must always be a wise pattern for us to follow. The preacher who starts his sermon with “You're all sinners and going to hell!”, whilst doctrinally correct, is also the preacher who will have lost his audience before he gets to his second sentence. As witnesses for Christ, either in the public arena or in private conversation, we do need points of common interest with those to whom we are speaking. Making our presentation of the Gospel relevant in terms of those to whom we are speaking, and their ages, is vital. There is no point trying to explain penal substitutionary atonement to a five year old, but they may understand a football substitute and what they do!

In dovetailing his message to suit his audience, Peter was imitating his Master. In 1 Corinthians 1:22 we read: *“For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified.”* God had given the Jews plenty of signs, or miracles, during the life of Jesus. Even on this Pentecost day, the disciples had spoken in tongues, another sign, to suit their sign seeking Jewish audience. But at the heart of the Gospel message was a crucified and risen Christ - the only Saviour of the world. If we do not focus on the cross and upon the reality of Christ's physical resurrection, then we do not preach the Christian Gospel, and it has no power to save!

The purpose of the Gospel

Lastly let us consider the purpose of the Gospel in Acts 2:41-47: *“Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and*

simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."

There could be no doubting the reality of the conversion experience in these first believers. Radically changed lives bore powerful testimony to the fact that the power of God had transformed these lives. The Gospel is not an academic set of beliefs to which we give only mental ascent. It is a whole of life experience that ought to cover every aspect of our lives. It is not reasonable to say that we believe the Gospel and yet continue to live our lives like unbelievers! These first Christians had a changed view of how they spent their time and how they spent their money!

The reason that these first believers saw souls saved daily was because they met together daily! We have formalised our Christianity into a Sunday event, and even that is under attack. They also had a real care for each other, ready to freely give all that they had to benefit their new brothers and sisters in the faith. Now I am quite happy to accept the argument that we may adapt their practices to suit our different socioeconomic society, but the principles that these first believers displayed - transformed lives, time spent together in prayer, teaching and the breaking of bread and a living care for each other - are non-negotiable essentials to the faith.

Here in Jerusalem, the Gospel produced its first harvest. As we shall see, it may be preached in different ways in different places with emphasis placed on various aspects of the Gospel to suit the audience. But wherever and whenever the Gospel is preached, we shall see that it is always about Jesus Christ - His death and resurrection that alone has the power to save us and transform us so that we can truly represent Him in this world.

Let me close by asking you if you know Him and His power as a reality in your life? If not, then do not delay but, like these early Christians in Jerusalem, accept that He died for you.

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