Pastor Jim West
January 31, 2016
Acts: The Promise IS for You
Acts 2:38-41

This morning we will FINALLY conclude our in-depth consideration of Acts 2:36-41. So, please stand and let’s read the Word of the Lord together.

37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” 38 And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” 40 And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” 41 So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

For the past several weeks we have looked deeply into this thought unit in Acts 2 because there we find the essentials of the Christian message as well as the essentials regarding how we as listeners are to respond to the Gospel. Remember how Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, quotes the prophet Joel and makes clear that on this day of Pentecost, the prophecies have come to past. The Spirit of God has been poured out upon the Jesus followers, and the last days have begun. Soon will come the Day of the Lord…a day of judgment for all who have rebelled against God, but those who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Peter proclaims to the crowds in Jerusalem that Jesus is Lord, Jesus is the name they must call upon to be saved, and that proclamation is based upon the Messiah’s remarkable life, his death on a cross, his resurrection, and his ascension to the right hand of God. Peter sums up his message in vs. 36 stating, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” Luke tells us that thousands of the Jews come under a deep conviction, such that they are “cut to the heart.” The crowds cry out, “What shall we do?” And Peter responds with two imperatives and two promises. The first imperative is to repent—to turn back to God, to return home to the Father, to turn around from the path of sinful rebellion, to be heartbroken and contrite about their sin and their condition before God. Next, Peter tells the crowds to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Remember that baptism means to be immersed, to be cleansed…but more than that, to be set apart as those belonging to Jesus Christ. Baptism is the public expression of our heart’s repentance and devotion to the One who saves, the King of King. In baptism we declare our allegiance to Jesus and His Kingdom.

Peter then promises that those who repent and call upon the name of Jesus in baptism will receive a full pardon from their King. Their sins will be forgiven. Their debt will be considered...
paid and they will be spared on the Day of the Lord. He also promises that they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit…a gift that comes with power to bear witness and to obey.

Finally, in our text for this morning, Peter declares in vs. 39ff: “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

Now, if you are wired like me, you might be wondering…What is Peter referring to when he mentions “the promise?” Who is Peter referring to when he says that the promise is for YOU? Your children? And who are those who are “far off?” Are those who call upon the name of the Lord those who get saved, or is it only those whom God calls to himself? You’ve asked some really good questions, so let’s go to work!

First, what is Peter referring to when he says “The PROMISE?” This is a really important question, and here’s why: when you read the Old Testament, God makes a lot of promises. Since Peter is speaking to Jews, they would be familiar with these promises. So here is just a sampling of some of those promises that would come to mind when Peter mentions “the promise.”

In Genesis 12:2–3, God makes a promise to Abraham, the father of Israel: I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Notice that God promised to bless Abraham and, through his descendants, the whole world. This promise is called the Abrahamic Covenant.

Here’s another promise. (Leviticus 26:11–13): “I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.” Notice here that God promises to be among His people, to make his dwelling place among his people, and He promises Israel that He will be their God.

God also promised Israel that their sin could be forgiven, their prosperity restored, and their nation healed if they would repent (2 Chronicles 7:14). “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

Under the terms of the Mosaic Covenant, God promised prosperity to Israel for obedience and destruction for disobedience (Deuteronomy 30:15–18). “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his
commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD
your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if you heart
turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I
declare to you today, that you shall surely perish.”

God also made a promise that we call the Davidic Covenant that is found in 2 Samuel 7. God
makes this promise to King David: “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your
fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will
establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his
kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son…I will discipline him
with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart
from him...And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your
throne shall be established forever.”

Now…the reason I’m leading you through all these promises and covenants of the Old
Testament is simply this: in every instance, the fulfillment of the promises of God, the
faithfulness of God to the covenants He made with his people, is found in Jesus Christ. Jesus
was, is, and will be the fulfillment of every promise God ever made in His Word. Now that is an
admittedly Christian thing to say, but make no mistake: Jesus absolutely understood that He was
the fulfillment of God’s promises. Remember, He even said as much after reading the Messianic
prophecies and promises from Isaiah Jesus says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your
hearing.” Think about it…

Jesus is the Davidic King whose kingdom never ends.

Jesus is the promised blessing for Israel because of his perfect obedience, even as he bore the
curse of God for disobedience by becoming the Lamb of God who bore the iniquities of us all.

Jesus is the means by which sins are forgiven and healing is distributed for those who will repent
and call upon his name, as promised in 2 Chronicles 7:14.

Jesus is the means by which the Holy Spirit will come to make His residence among those who
have repented and called upon the name of Jesus to be saved, which fulfills the promises of God
that we read in Leviticus 26.

And Jesus is the son of Abraham who will bless the Jews as well as every nation under the sun,
thus fulfilling the Abrahamic Covenant we read in Genesis 12.

I could go on and on, but these examples should help you to appreciate how important this
moment is when Peter states, “The PROMISE is for you, your children, and all who are far off.”

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When Peter uses the word “promise,” the meaning explodes within the Jewish context. I hope you can see that Peter is drawing upon the ancient memory of a people who knew themselves to be “the people of God” who lived as those who had “the promises of God.” This is why Peter begins his sermon by quoting the promise of God spoken by the prophet Joel, that a day would come when the Spirit of God would be poured out, when the last days would begin, …a time when those who called upon the name of the Lord would be saved from the just punishment they deserved. Peter’s whole case has been based on the promises of God to Israel, and God’s fulfillment of His promises through Jesus Christ.

So here’s the tension: the Jews were the people of God who had the promises of God, but the Jews just crucified God’s Messiah, who was sent to fulfill all of the promises of God on behalf of the Jews. And remember, the curse of treason against King Jesus was not just upon those who crucified Jesus…the first century Jews assumed the curse would also fall upon their children and their children.

But now Peter has proclaimed the good news of the Gospel: Repent and be baptized in the name of your risen King, Jesus Christ, and your sins will be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit! That’s the promise! It is not only the new promise made possible in Christ, it is the fulfillment of all the promises in scripture! AND, says Peter, that PROMISE is even for YOU…you people on the streets of Jerusalem who just a few weeks ago crucified your King…AND it’s for your children and all who will be born into your families in future generations…AND it’s for all who are far off.

Think about it: what one group of people, when convicted of their sin, will most likely assume that they are disqualified from forgiveness and heaven? Would it not be those people who knew that they had just killed the Son of God, the Messiah, the hope of the world? I mean, if killing Jesus doesn’t somehow disqualify you from forgiveness…

And yet Peter says, “No…no one is disqualified. The worst of sinners, even those of you who killed Jesus…all who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God…even you…the Promise is for you. And the promise is for your children, and their children, and for every generation to follow.”

Listen, so many people here, so many people out there, have committed sins and lived in such a way that leads them to believe they are “too far gone.” That’s simply not true. If those guilty of crucifying the Son of God and the King of King can be forgiven, we all can be forgiven. That’s why the Gospel of Jesus Christ is GOOD NEWS…forgiveness is available to all who will repent and call upon the name of Jesus.

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And note, the promise is for “those people, too”…those who are far off. Now lots of commentators like to point out that Peter is most likely referring to the Jews who live in surrounding countries. But remember that Peter has heard Jesus say, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations…” He didn’t say, “Make disciples among the Jews who live in all nations…” Clearly the Holy Spirit is pointing to the fact that the promise of God…the promise of salvation and the power of the Holy Spirit for all who will repent and call upon Jesus Christ…that promise will extend to the whole world: first to the Jews, but then to the Gentiles as well.

As we march through Acts, we’ll see it takes Peter awhile to grasp the meaning of his own sermon. It’s not until Acts 10 that Peter becomes fully convinced that the Gentiles can come to Jesus without first becoming Jews. But listen: as a fellow preacher, I get that the Holy Spirit can speak truth through a person, even when that person does not fully understand that truth until much later…happens to me all the time!

We’ll circle back to this theme throughout the book of Acts, but here’s the point: Jesus Christ brings all people who repent and call upon Him in faith into the status of “God’s People.” That status will no longer be reserved just for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles…and that is really good news that we will unpack in further depth in the days ahead. It also means that no one is disqualified from the PROMISE of salvation in Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit based upon ethnicity, race, gender, or the sins they have committed. The PROMISE is for all who will repent and call upon the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins…but notice that Peter adds one more bit of information: “…everyone whom the LORD our God calls to himself.”

Here Peter reveals a mystery that is found throughout the New Testament. Salvation…the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, is promised to all people who will repent and call upon the name of Jesus. However, Peter, Jesus, Paul, John, all agree that no one can actually repent and call upon the name of Jesus unless the Father calls that person or that group of people to Himself. Jesus literally states in John 6:44, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” Herein lies the inevitable tension that always exists between the Sovereignty of God’s election and the observable reality called Human Free Will.

On the one hand Peter makes no bones about it: the citizens of Jerusalem, just like the citizens of the KC Metro, must receive the Gospel and repent. They must call upon the name of the Lord in order for their sins to be forgiven and to escape the Day of the Lord that is coming soon. Peter even exhorts his listeners in vs. 40, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation!” That sounds like something we should decide to do and “just do it!” Right? Well, that’s not totally wrong. As my friend Phil Ledgerwood said, “Peter meant that the way someone might say, "Save yourselves from this sinking ship." That person doesn't mean, "Have a conversion experience so you'll go to heaven after the ship sinks." He means, "This ship is going down. Get
off. Your generation is about to be judged; get away from it via repentance and baptism. People get ready, there's a train a-comin'. Don't need no ticket, you just get on board.”

But that’s not the whole picture when it comes to salvation, and we know it. If people were simply motivated by fear and self-preservation, everyone would be a Christian. However, not all people are Christians, and not all people repent. Why? Peter says, God must first call us to Himself. What does that look like? The answer is in the text. Remember that those in Jerusalem who had heard Peter proclaim the Gospel were “cut to the heart,” and it’s only then that they inquire about what they must do. I believe that’s the point here: any time that a sinful human being is cut to the heart about her sin and the deep love of Jesus Christ on the cross, that’s the tell-tale sign that God is calling that person to Himself. We can’t make ourselves convicted…that’s something that happens to us through the work of God’s Holy Spirit who brings conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment to those whom God calls.

Let me sum up this point and conclude my message with this very geeky observation that really is pretty cool when you think about it! The Greek word that Peter uses in vs. 40 that the ESV translates as “Save yourselves” is actually a Greek verb, sotheite, that, according to the way it is spelled, can either be translated in the middle voice or the passive voice. The middle voice translation is “Save yourselves”…so it sounds as though Peter is exhorting people to do the work of saving themselves. However, the passive voice translation of the same verb is “Let yourselves be saved!” Now go back to Phil’s illustration of the sinking boat. If you are on the boat with the passengers, and the boat is going down, you are telling them to jump off the boat, and to jump now! Save yourselves!

But if you are safely aboard the lifeboat, and you see your friends on the sinking ship, you might invite them to come into the lifeboat, to “let themselves be saved” by those who have come to their rescue.

The truth is…it’s both. It’s always both. However, there is a correct order of things, and that’s important for us to remember.

God’s action in salvation always comes first. We must first be called and convicted by the sovereign election of God and the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. That usually looks like being cut to the heart—convinced that our ship is going down and that we are in need of rescue. Nevertheless, we must also respond. God acts first, but our response comes next. When God brings conviction, we have to get off the ship…we need to jump.

Some denominations or theologians try to dissolve the mystery that exists in the text…I do not. And I’ll tell you why: when I consider loving relationships, I always see this tension at work. I didn’t make myself fall in love with Christy Thomas in 1992…something happened there that I
had no control over…yet I was left with a choice, and I had to act in order for that relationship to be consummated. I love my children, and I have loved them every second of their existence, even when they were in the womb…but I can’t force them to love me back. I try to show my love for them, I provide for them, I pay for their mistakes and I would die for them without hesitation…but they must choose to love me back, or we won’t have a loving relationship.

Listen: Salvation always happens within the context a loving relationship between God and human beings. Salvation is not a topic that applies to dogs or cows or trees, for only humans are moral creatures fashioned in the image of God in order to enjoy a loving relationship with Him. In loving relationships on earth there is offense and forgiveness, and there is quite often the one who loves and the one who is the beloved. There is a husband and a wife, a parent and a child, a deep abiding friendship, or those who have gone to war together. The Bible gives expression to all of these images as ways to think about our relationship with God.

Salvation happens in the context of a loving relationship…Salvation is not words on a page, salvation is not creeds or confessions, salvation is not doctrines or dogma…salvation is ultimately the reconciliation between a perfectly just and merciful God and a human being who is both free and in desperate need of being saved.

And this is the gospel: God so loves us…God so loved the world…that He gave us His Son…that whoever would be cut to the heart…whoever would simply repent and call upon His name, would not perish, but inherit HIM…the life eternal…the Bridegroom…the Lamb…the King! God loves first. And because God loves first, Jesus is our Lifeboat, heaven is our home, God is our Father. Listen…search your heart: even now the Holy Spirit beckons every sin-sick soul, all whom God has called to Himself, to hear the Gospel and receive the Gospel.

Just like Peter, I bear witness and I exhort you…repent, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit…and come home. Home to your True Father, the lover of your soul, that you might be counted among those who belong to His household, citizens of His Kingdom, loyal subjects to the one true King who gave up His life for us, even when we were His enemies. The broad path that leads to destruction is a sinking ship. We can’t save ourselves, and we can’t fix the ship…it’s time to jump.

Receive the gospel. Luke reports that some 3000 souls received the Gospel and were baptized. Those 3000 people who were baptized and received the Holy Spirit that day launched a movement that changed the world. Perhaps this is the day your world will be changed forever. Is your heart convicted, pierced by the knowledge of your sin and the deep love of Christ? Receive the gospel…take it…believe it…let yourself be saved…your Father is calling you to Himself…jump.

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Will you pray with me?