



The Classic Gospel Sermon That Launched the Church

Series: Acts -- Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ

Acts 2:22-41

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Introduction This morning, beloved, we have before us the classic gospel sermon in all of Scripture. It is the prototype sermon showing us the way that the gospel is to be preached, the classic gospel sermon, the sermon that launched the church. But what we need to see at the outset is that the very fact that this sermon was being preached at all is itself a miracle and a testimony to the transforming and emboldening power of the Holy Spirit.

Think about it. Just a little over fifty days earlier, Peter had openly denied Jesus three times before a few women and some inconsequential men, people who were no threat to him at all, all the while terrified for his life. But now, on this day of Pentecost we see him boldly preaching the truth, boldly standing before the city and the very people who had cried out for Jesus' crucifixion – men who had proven to be brutal opponents and haters of Christ, and declaring that the One that they had crucified, God had made both Lord and Christ. No more cowardice, no more fear of man, no more cowering. How do you explain that – terrified when he should not be and bold when human wisdom would say he should have been afraid?

Think about something else. That Peter would preach the gospel of grace to the very people who were responsible for the death of Jesus is nothing short of supernatural. What would have been the natural human response to the murderers of Jesus? The natural response in Peter would have been to keep his mouth shut, to keep the gospel to himself, to judge them unworthy to hear the gospel of forgiveness and to take revenge against them by letting them die in their sins and go to hell, all the while justifying it in his heart. What is it that makes a man preach forgiveness to the very people that have slain His Master and Lord, His best friend?

There is only one answer isn't there? It is the emboldening, transforming, miraculous work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Peter, in the life of all of Christ's disciples. Peter does what He does

in this text because He is a man compelled by the grace of God, a man filled with the Holy Spirit, a man saved and transformed and empowered by Christ through His Spirit to fulfill the ministry that Jesus had given to Him of making the fame of Christ known throughout the world, starting right here in Jerusalem, among the very ones who had rejected Him and put Him to death.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter unflinchingly does what the Holy Spirit leads and empowers Him to do – specifically to testify to the glory of Christ! Beloved, do not miss that as we get into this sermon this morning. This was Pentecost. The Holy Spirit had just descended upon the disciples in a powerful and prominent way and just when you might expect that it would be the right timing to go into an exposition of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, to testify to His person and work, Peter instead preaches Jesus Christ crucified, raised from the dead, and exalted to the right hand of the Father in heaven. That is no accident. This is exactly what is to be expected when the Holy Spirit has come upon Him. In John 15:26, Jesus said of the Holy Spirit: ““But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.” (John 15:26, ESV) Then in chapter 16:13-14 we read: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:13–14, ESV)

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter was not afraid and he was not afraid because the Jesus he served was not a mere man but the risen Lord of all. He is the crucified, buried, risen, and ascended One who sits at the right hand of God the Father, who commanded the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and empowered the preaching of His gospel.

Christians, so many times, want to know if the Holy Spirit is present or active in a church – how can we know? Let me tell you this: Wherever you find Christ boldly, unashamedly and powerfully preached and worshiped and obeyed as Lord, Savior, Sovereign King and Glorious God; wherever you find men and women pointed to Christ alone as the only hope for the human soul, wherever you find much being made of the works and worth of Christ – where the spotlight is on Him --and little is being made of men, wherever you find the gospel of Jesus Christ clearly and faithfully and unreservedly preached from the Holy Spirit inspired Word of God – there the Holy Spirit is active, there the Holy Spirit is present, there the Holy Spirit is at work.

The Holy Spirit was at work in Peter that Pentecost day and the result was one of the greatest gospel sermons ever preached, one that should form the way the gospel is preached today. One that our modern day pulpiteers, our modern day relevance peddlers, would do well to read and regard as the most relevant message ever preached.

When we left this text last week, Peter was just finishing His introduction and he set the tone for this main thrust of his sermon by telling his hearers that they were in the last days, that the judgment of God was looming, telling the people how: “the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Acts 2:20–21, ESV) This is the backdrop, the context for Peter’s sermon. Jonathan Edwards made the point that the gospel is never truly proclaimed unless it is done against the backdrop of the warning of God’s inescapable judgment to come upon all who cling to their sinful ways, their self-obsessed ways, and who never come to the cross. Judgment is coming but everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. And now, He is going to make it clear who the Lord truly is.

The Classic Gospel Sermon (v. 22-36) Let’s look at this classic gospel sermon and its composition. Now understand beloved that we do not have the manuscript of Peter’s sermon. That much is made clear by verse 40 that says: “And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them...” (Acts 2:40a, ESV) But we do have clearly identified the elements that made up Peter’s sermon. First, Peter declares the:

Life and Ministry of Jesus Read verse 22 again: ““Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—” (Acts 2:22, ESV) The mighty works, wonders and signs that God accomplished through Jesus needed no explanation at all. They would have been fresh in everyone’s mind and memory. But what Peter makes clear is that these were not merely miracles – the healing of the blind, the cleansing of lepers, the raising of the dead and more – they were mighty works, evidences of the power of God Himself at work among the people. They were signs that the Kingdom of God had come in the person of Jesus Christ, the King of Heaven. Peter tells them without apology that the claims that Jesus made of being the Son of God were verified, authenticated, and confirmed as genuine by the miracles

that God performed in and through Him. The reality of them was irrefutable. Peter's point was that anyone with eyes of faith, with honest hearts could have seen the truth that Jesus was the Messiah, God's Son, but instead they crucified Him.

His Crucifixion Peter continues in verse 33: "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." (Acts 2:23, ESV) Peter does not hesitate or soften his words at all, but clearly tells his hearers, these devout men in Jerusalem, that they were complicit in the murder, in the shameful crucifixion of Jesus Christ – this Jesus...you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. The lawless men were the Romans. They carried out the actual sentence of crucifixion of Jesus, the Son of God, but these people to whom Peter was speaking, these men and women were themselves guilty of Christ's death – as much as if they had driven the nails themselves. In their sinfulness, because of their sinful and unbelieving hearts, they had put the Son of God to death, but even this was according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. This was God's will.

Now think on this. What, at first glance, might seem to invalidate Jesus' claims to be the Messiah – his crucifixion – instead serves to validate His claim since it was the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose and decree. Jesus was not killed as some helpless victim of His enemies, but because of God's definite plan – His eternal decree and predetermined plan that Jesus would die as the Savior of His people, suffering the curse that our sins deserve, tasting death and the wrath of God for all of His people who would turn to Him in repentance and faith. It was the very reason for the name He was given. The angel told Joseph: "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21, ESV) God didn't have to do this. He could have consigned all of us to hell. He could have kept back His Son, but He didn't. He decreed before the foundation of the world, and brought to pass according to His foreknowledge – His deliberate action – Christ's death on the cross to save His people through His blood shed by the hands of sinful men.

There is a great mystery in this, but it is one that Peter does not shy away from. While God decreed the atoning death of Jesus before the foundation of the world and, by His sovereign hand, brought it to pass, sinful men out of their own desires and own hearts arrested, scourged and crucified the Son of God. They were not forced to do it; they did it out of their own desires. God ordained Christ's death, but they were guilty of His murder. As sinners by nature, as enemies of God, as haters of God they were all responsible for Christ's death – as are we.

We might ask, why does Peter do this? Why mention God's sovereignty and the guilt of man together like this? They seem opposed to one another. But they are not. Peter wants them to know the sovereign mercy and purpose of God in the atoning death of Jesus but he also wants them to see their guilt before the Holy God for rejecting His Son and putting Him to death. This truth is for them and for us as well. One preacher has said: When I look at the death of Christ from the perspective of an unbeliever, I should writhe in agony that I, through my sin and hatred of God, participated in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ! Yet when I look at the death of Christ from the perspective of a believer, I should rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory that God determined my salvation before the world was created through the provision of His Son. These men were guilty of Christ's death; by their own will and rebellious desire – as sinners all of us are guilty of Christ's death! -- but it was also according to the plan of God that Jesus was killed. Yet, His death was not the end. It was followed by a glorious resurrection.

His Resurrection Starting in verse 24: "God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. For David says concerning him, " 'I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.' "Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses." (Acts 2:24–32, ESV) Peter just says it. He declares the truth plainly – God raised the one you crucified from the dead. He is the Lord of life; it is impossible that death should hold Him. It impossible that He should not conquer the grave and rise from the dead. How could it be otherwise considering who He is? And they need to see that this was prophesied beforehand.

Peter says, "Even that great King, David, the greatest human King in Israel's history testifies to that truth!" Peter presents David's prophetic testimony in Psalm 16:8-11 to the resurrection of Jesus: "'I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. You have made known

to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.” Who could David have been speaking of? It couldn’t be David. David is dead. He had not been rescued from the grave, from Hades. His soul had gone down into the abode of the dead. His body had seen corruption, decomposition, in the grave. His tomb was with them today and was a well-known landmark. These words, rightly understood, could only refer to the Messiah, to David’s greater Son. And that is exactly what Peter declares. David was a prophet; He spoke with faith in God’s promise, God’s oath, that one of his descendants God would place upon His throne as King over Israel. For that reason, Peter says: he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. The only one who fits that promise is Jesus and these disciples were all witness of His resurrection. But he does not end with the resurrection. Peter then declares the consequences of this resurrection – Christ’s ascension and continuing ministry

His Ascension and Continuing Ministry Read starting in verse 33: “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, “ ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” ’ ” (Acts 2:33–35, ESV) Where, then, was Jesus now if He had been raised from the dead? He was enthroned on high, exalted by God the Father to His right hand of authority and power. He had received from the Father the gift of the Holy Spirit so that He might pour out His Spirit upon His people. From this position of supreme honor and absolute power over the universe, Christ poured forth His Spirit. That was the meaning of what they were seeing and hearing that day, yet another authenticating proof that He is the Son of God. Do you see it? The whole focus of this sermon is Jesus Christ – not the phenomena taking but place, but the Lord who was giving to His people His blessings won at the cross.

Peter then clinches his argument with another quotation from David. The great invitation to sit at God’s right hand was not given to David, but to Jesus. “‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” This is from Psalm 110 and the words that David uses for Lord in Hebrew make the implication of his words crystal clear. He says: “Yahweh (the Great I Am) said to Adonai (to my Sovereign One, to the One who has the right to rule me) sit at my right hand.” Yahweh was, of course , the sacred name of God given to Moses at the burning bush. The Jews had protected that name from being profaned or taken in vain by heaping up other names and titles for God to avoid saying the name “Yahweh,” the most sacred of which was “Adonai.” David uses that very name to refer to the Messiah, to Jesus.

The one that Yahweh has enthroned at His right hand is above every king, emperor or president. He is King over all kings and Lord over all lords. Yahweh has placed Him at His right hand until He makes all of His enemies His footstool, until He judges all who refuse to honor Him. And there was no doubt whom Peter was including in that list of His enemies – the very ones who had crucified Him, who were standing before Peter that day. There is only one conclusion that any rational and sane mind can come to, only one truth about

His Inescapable Identity Peter says it unambiguously and plainly: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”” (Acts 2:36, ESV) There is no doubt – the One that you crucified, Jesus of Nazareth, God has made both Lord – the Sovereign King of the Universe and Christ – the Savior of sinners – Lord and Christ, King and Redeemer, Sovereign and Savior. God has exalted His Son as the Lord -- before whom all will give account – and Christ to whom all may flee for forgiveness. This is a matter of objective reality not human opinion, of divine decree and not human acceptance. This is the incontrovertible truth.

All will bow – some willingly, joyfully, gladly on bended knee, some on broken knee, their backs His footstool – but all will bow. Peter states it as objective fact, regardless of human opinion. God does not merely invite people to bow before Christ. He commands it. He requires it because He has put Christ at His right hand.

This sermon makes perfect sense. “You know Jesus. He is not a religious phony, not a mere man. He is the One promised by Scripture, the one authenticated by divine miracles as the Son of God. You are guilty of killing the Son of God. In your sinfulness you crucified the Lord of Glory. God raised Him from the dead. We are witnesses of it. It is Christ whom God has exalted to His right hand, Who has poured out His Spirit, whose power you can see and witness now. God has made Him Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. What now? What now?”

A Blessed Response (v. 37-41) Peter concludes his exposition of this classic gospel sermon and the response is beautiful. “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?”” (Acts 2:37, ESV) Hearing these words from Peter, they are cut to the core. Convicted by the Holy Spirit through the

gospel preaching of Peter, conscience-stricken, they cry out to Peter and the other disciples in great personal turmoil. The Holy Spirit had stabbed them with conviction of their horrible sin. Peter's words had brought a sword to their souls. All their excuses and rationalizations, all their self-applause and self-justification silenced, now convinced of the truth about Jesus and about their sin, they desperately ask, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Spurgeon rightly said: "It is idle to attempt to heal those who are not wounded, to attempt to clothe those who have never been stripped, and to make those rich who have never realized their poverty."

One of the weaknesses in modern evangelism is our hurry to bypass true conviction too quickly, to go to the promise of the gospel without letting someone feel the weight of their sins, the heaviness of true conviction, trying to alleviate the consequences of their sins. I think we believe erroneously sometimes that people throughout the world are consciously living under the burden of their sins, the burden of their rebellion against God, desperate for deliverance and it simply isn't true. There are people who are certainly miserable because of the consequences of their sins, but no-one is miserable because of a true sense of their sinfulness and their rebellion against God, and because they have spurned and hated the One True God. Let's be honest. These people to whom Peter was speaking were not pining the night before in their own prayer meetings, longing to be saved and made holy and righteous before the God they had offended. They had no sense of Holy Spirit conviction. That conviction does not happen apart from the Holy Spirit using the preaching of the Word of God. It was the truth that brought them to their knees, a proper application of the Word of God that did not hurry past the pain of conviction, but which instead made their conviction acute, causing them to cry out in despair and need and which made Peter's next words music to their sin strapped souls.

"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." (Acts 2:38, ESV) What were they to do? There was grace for them, forgiveness available to them but how were they to lay hold of it? Peter tells them -- repent and believe and be baptized as a testimony to your faith in Christ and you will be forgiven and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. I say repent and believe, beloved, because repentance and faith are two sides of the same gospel coin. There is no repentance without faith born of conviction and there is no faith that is absent repentance. The word repentance is so often minimized, reduced to simply changing your mind about Jesus – it does require that, but it is far more.

Repentance is a change of belief, a change of belief about who you really are, about the just wrath of God that your sins deserve. It's seeing your personal guilt before God, the defilement of your sin, the repulsiveness and damning nature of it. It is a change of your emotions – a sorrow for sin committed against a holy and a just God, pain at offending God and treating Him with such contempt; and it is a turning away from sin, from yourself, from your self-rule to embrace the only One who saves, Jesus Christ, as both Lord and Savior; turning from sin to God with a desire to obey Him and have Him regardless of the cost. Repentance is a complete change of heart, a spiritual about-face.

Peter called them to repentance and to baptism, not as an outward ritual but as the public confession of their faith in Jesus as Lord and Christ. When Peter commanded them to be baptized, it would have been shocking to their ears. To the Jews baptism was required only of Gentile converts of those who were considered to be gross sinners and yet that is just what they were. When Peter called them to be baptized, he was commanding them to make a break with their past fully and completely and to be publically identified with Christ. This baptism in the name of Jesus simply means to be baptized by His authority, acknowledging Who He is, submitting To His Lordship, trusting in His righteousness, and living for His name. This outward act of baptism was to serve as a visible picture of the reality of their inward repentance and faith and the fact that God had washed away their sins. I want you to see that Peter did not make it easy for them; He made it real. Repent and believe, let it be seen by your baptism, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, the promise of eternal life. And Peter said, this gospel is not just for you, not just for your circumstances, “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.” (Acts 2:39, ESV) This is the gospel for the whole world.

Luke tells us in verse 40: “And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.”” (Acts 2:40, ESV) This generation, to which these people belonged, had been rebuked by Jesus as being “a faithless and perverse generation” because of their unbelief and rejection of Him and His message. But Peter pleads with them, “Save yourselves by turning to the One who alone can save you. Be delivered from the crooked generation and become a part of the community of faith.” And many received the gospel call. “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” (Acts 2:41, ESV)

Words to Consider

What do we need to consider as we look at this text, as we consider this amazing sermon and the results wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit?

I think the most important thing to consider in light of this message this morning is this: Is this the gospel we have believed? Is this the Christ we have trusted in? The gospel is the “power of God for salvation for everyone who believes.” Is this the gospel you have believed? Have you received it in this way – with a desperate realization of your sinfulness and offense toward God, with a desperate heart crying “What shall I do?”; with a willingness to embrace Christ whatever the cost? Have you come to the point of saying, “I am not worthy of God’s forgiveness.” You are not; none of us are. That is why salvation is completely of God’s mercy and grace but it is yours for the taking if you repent and believe. Has the gospel done its work in you? This is what conversion is -- faith producing repentance; belief in Christ and the gospel producing the profoundest changes in conviction and in behavior, a complete break with your former life. Nothing less than this. And it produces in you a realization of your continuing need for grace and forgiveness. Is there still in you a realization of your desperate need for grace, your desperate need for Jesus Himself, whom God has made both Lord and Christ?

Second, when I look at this gospel sermon by Peter, at his boldness and his conviction and the content of his preaching, we need to see that when we dare to speak for God, we must be sure that we are saying something worth hearing. Peter was fully convinced that he was giving them the only hope for their eternity. He was not giving them religious tidbits; He was giving them the words of life. Are you moved with that conviction when you speak to a lost person? Do you speak in such a way and with such passion, knowing that you are giving an unbeliever 'the words of life'?

Third, going along with the last point, for those of us who have bought into or may be buying into the thought that there has to be a more modern, a more easy, a sensibly watered down version of the gospel, a less-confrontational gospel, that we could embrace that may grow our church more effectively, I counsel you to look at this text again. The gracious God who commands all men everywhere to repent, who gladly gives men the forgiveness of sins through His Son Jesus Christ, is also the God who hates sin and who takes the rejection of His Son and of the true gospel of Jesus Christ seriously. The gospel is good news to those who receive it, but eternally bad news to those who do not. We do no one a service by minimizing sin, by

bypassing conviction, by watering down gospel truth to make it more palatable to lost men and women. We only condemn them to hell, despite our misguided attempts at softening the message to make them receive it.

Last let me say, I have often thought in reading these words, what kind of sermon produces this kind of result. Could we get the same results by simply reading this sermon out loud? If we could, I would be the first one in line to do so. Trust me. But beloved, the effect of this sermon was not produced by eloquence but by the determined purpose of God, the Holy Spirit present with the Word. Ours is not to produce the results, but to preach the truth in the power of The Holy Spirit and trust in Him to do with it what He wills. By God's grace, that is just what we will do.

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