

Studies in the Book of Acts – Part 7

“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.”
– Acts 2.22-36.

In our last study, we learned about the event on the Day of Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus called “the baptism in the Holy Spirit.” We

considered the sensory elements of this event that made it a sign, and we heard Peter's explanation, from the writings of Joel, connecting this event and the judgment of God against Israel which would occur 40 years later, as the two earthly proofs that Jesus the Messiah had received His kingdom from God and was ruling from heaven – offering redemption to “whoever” on earth will trust in Him and obey His commandments. Immediately after citing the Joel prophecy, Peter launches into a sermon about the life and work of Jesus and how His death and resurrection fulfilled the expectations of Old Testament prophecy and the eternal purpose of God. This has often been called “greatest sermon ever preached.” Some might challenge that accolade, since Jesus was not the preacher, and it might seem impossible that the greatest sermon was not preached by the greatest preacher. But I think the 19th Century Evangelist, W.J. Lhamon offered a compelling defense for the supremacy of this sermon over all others, when he pointed out that this sermon was the announcement of what every sermon preached before anticipated, and what every sermon preached since has celebrated. John the Immerser preached great sermons, and Jesus even said, “For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist,” yet He followed that thrilling compliment with a caveat: “but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he” (Luke 7.28). Brother H.C. Booth, the great-great grandfather of brother Rylan Nichols, wrote in 1883, “It cannot be in holiness that the least in the Kingdom of Heaven, the church, is greater than John... we have no evidence that anyone was more devoted to God than him. It must have been in the difference in their ministry. The prophets prophesied the coming of Christ; John showed that Christ was among them; but the preachers of the gospel (beginning with Peter in Acts 2) showed that Christ had suffered, and had arisen from the grave, ‘and had brought life and immortality to light’!” In fact, Jesus said the same thing about the ministry of the apostles, compared even to His own! “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father” (John 14.12). When Jesus said, “I go to my Father” He spoke of completing His earthly mission, and the “greater works” that would be done by the disciples would be that earthly proclamation of its

completion to the sinful population of earth! So as brother Lhamon observed: “Peter’s sermon was, therefore, to all proceeding preachers an impossibility. To the Savior himself it would have been an anachronism. Its repetition or its equal is likewise and impossibility to all succeeding preachers, for the occasion, the inspiration, and the results of Pentecost can never be duplicated” (Studies in Acts). Peter stood that day, with the “keys of the Kingdom of Heaven” to open the doors of God’s House and announce the terms of entrance and enjoyment of the riches of God’s grace. But it began with a message about Jesus Himself!

Acts 2.22: “**Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth** [literally, Jesus the Nazarene], **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...**” Peter appeals to the recent and renowned history of Jesus ministry as evidence that He was a man of God and a teacher sent by Him. The Gospels tells us on several occasions that “news” and “reports” had spread about Jesus, not only throughout the whole land of Palestine, including into areas He never travelled, but in fact it had reached out beyond into the lands of the Gentiles! And those who knew the true God, knew that one who worked real miracles was being “attested” – the NASB footnote says, “exhibited or accredited” – Boothroyd’s translation says, “manifested” – Wynne says, “pointed out” – Granville Penn says, “He was marked out to you by God.” Nicodemus admitted to Jesus that the Pharisees and rulers of the Jews understood the connection between miracles and divine approval. In John 3.2 he said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent from God, for no one can do these signs (one of the same words for supernatural works that Peter uses here) that you do unless God is with him!” The miracles of Christ did not only amaze a few devotees and sycophants blinded by love for Jesus, they were real, mighty wonders that even left the enemies of Jesus with no excuse not to believe in Him (John 15.22-24). So, Peter affirms that the crowd “**knows**” the truth of what he says.

He continues in verse 23, “**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.” There is a lot going on in these words, and they aren’t easy to process. Peter explains that God was at work before, in, and after the works of those “lawless” – sinful, wicked hands, that crucified Jesus! The death of Jesus Christ was a murder of an innocent man. When we read the Gospel accounts, it’s difficult not be overwhelmed with righteous indignation toward all the parties involved, from the bloodthirsty Jews who were driven by envy and bitterness to demand his death, to the cowardly Roman governor who refused to advocate for what he admitted was an innocent man, but rather handed Him over to be brutalized and executed in one of the most severe and torturous ways known in human history. In fact, some translations render the phrase “lawless hands” as “the hands of godless men” and understand it as a figure of speech for the Gentiles, literally being “hands without the law.” Peter doesn’t deny any of this – he affirms humans, in fact many in his audience that day, murdered Jesus! But when he says that Jesus was “**delivered**” to this fate, he does not ascribe that to the men who betrayed or killed Him. Jesus Himself had preached to the apostles on several occasions that He was going to “give His life” for His people, and that’s something the apostles affirm over and over again in their writings. In John 10.17-18, Jesus said, “Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” Yet here, in this sermon, Peter does not look at Jesus, or the Jews, or the Romans as the primary agents of the Lord’s Death. He says that God was behind the whole thing, and that it happened “**by {His} determined purpose and foreknowledge...**” One paraphrase says, “It was resolved by God before it took place.” Now, it is possible to understand these statements to simply mean that God knew and spoke, through the prophets, about the death of Jesus before it happened. And that is certainly true. The apostles and evangelists frequently cited Psalm 22, Isaiah 53, and other Old Testament passages as predictions of the suffering of Jesus, and Jesus said that it fulfilled the sum message of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24.44-48). But the phrase “determined purpose” implies that God more

than knew about it, in some way, this was a part of His plan, and He orchestrated it. In this place, Peter doesn't explain what the purpose was, he simply asserts it, because it seems that in this sermon, Peter's focus is not so much on the death of Christ, but what happened afterward! He informs that the same God who brought Jesus down into the grave, brought His back out again! **"God raised"** Jesus **"up,"** Peter says in verse 24, **"having loosed the pains of death..."** This is an interesting expression "the pains of death" is translated "the bonds of death" in some versions, and in the Latin translation it's "the sorrows of the Netherworld." But the word "pains" literally means "birth pangs" and A.T. Robertson wrote that "Early Christian writers interpreted the resurrection of Christ as a birth" out of the realm of the dead, and took these words to mean that by God's power Jesus burst free from death like a new born baby coming into the world! The language can be taken just as correctly to mean that death was like a chain or chord which ties most down to grave, but it was loosened by God in the case of Jesus, **"because it was not possible that He should be held by it."** Why was it impossible for Jesus to be held, or overcome by death? Surely because of His divine nature, because He had never done a thing deserving of death, but also, as Peter goes on to say, because also, according the same **"determined purpose and foreknowledge"** that took Him to the cross, He was destined to rise for further work in God's plan.

So Peter continues in verse 25: **"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.'"** This is a quotation from the Greek translation of Psalm 16. This Psalm describes the blessed estate of a righteous person who trusts in God and honors Him and His people over all worldly allurements. The psalm is actually written from the perspective of David and other faithful Israelites, and David affirms his own confidence in the Lord, that because of God his flesh dwells in safety and

rests in hope, even when it goes down into the ground and his soul is swallowed up by Sheol – as the Hebrews called “death” often picturing it is a deep, black pit, or the open jaws of huge and terrible beast, here we have the Greek word “Hades” which referred the netherworld, or the realm of departed spirits, both the good and the evil. In Psalm 16, David confidently says that his flesh and spirit have hope in face of death, that going into the pit will not be his final end, but God “will make known to him the ways of life” and bring him through death so that he might enjoy God’s presence forever. In Psalm 16.10, David expresses that his own hope of a resurrection and triumph over death, was based on the fact that God would bring His “Holy One” through death and restore Him to life. David was not the “Holy One,” but this was a title of the Messiah, or the Christ, known on earth and the other worlds as well! We find that this was the title most often used by demons and evil Spirits when addressing Jesus – “the Holy One of God” (Mark 1.24)! Because God would not leave the Messiah in the grave, David was confident that God would not leave any of the righteous who trusted in Him in the grave either.

And Peter establishes this interpretation, in verse 29: **“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.”** Unlike with Jesus, men could go to the place where David’s body was entombed and find his ancient bones still interred there. In fact, the tomb of David was opened, once before the time of Peter and once after by kings who pillaged it for its treasures. We are unsure which of the caves near Jerusalem was actually the tomb of Jesus now, but ever since three days after His death, no man denied that it was empty or claimed he could produce a tomb, as Peter says they could with David. **“Therefore,”** verse 30 continues, **“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.”** Peter says two important things here: first, he tells us that David made this prophecy, not only from the revelation of the

Spirit, but also from faith in the promise of God. God declared to David, and made a covenant with him in 2 Samuel 7.12-16. Through the prophet Nathan, God said: **“When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will 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 his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men. But My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever.”**

David reflected on this promise often. In Psalm 89.3-4 he wrote God’s words: **“I have made a covenant with My chosen, I have sworn to My servant David: ‘Your seed I will establish forever, and build up your throne to all generations.’”** And in Psalm 132.11 David penned the words to which Peter alludes directly, **“The LORD has sworn in truth to David; He will not turn from it: ‘I will set upon your throne the fruit of your body.’”** Because of these promises, David knew that death would not conquer his promised son, as it does other men. **“That His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption...”** (verse 31). I think it is important to explain what Peter means here. We should not push this to mean that the crucified body of Jesus underwent no *rigor mortuus* or any of the natural processes of decay that immediately follow death. The point is that God did not leave Jesus’ body in the grave long enough for it to rot away – before there could be any doubt or question as to whether the empty tomb and risen body really belonged to Jesus, God raised Him up and Peter adds, **“of which we are all witnesses.”**

Verse 33: **“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.”** So Peter tells us that the throne of David that the Christ was “raised up from the dead to receive” was not a physical seat in Jerusalem, but a heavenly antitype – the divine

authority of God to rule over the Lord's Redeemed people and hold all authority in heaven and on earth! Peter reminds us that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was God's great sign that this had transpired, and then informs that just as with the death and resurrection of Christ, the ascension and coronation in heaven were all part of God's eternal plan: **“For David did not ascend into the heavens** [Just as David's physical remains were still entombed near Jerusalem, his soul was at that moment still in the waiting place of Hades], **but he says himself: ‘The LORD said to my Lord** [You remember how Jesus used this passage to prove that He was both the son of David and the Son of God. He was David's promised heir, but David in the spirit, called him Lord! And he heard, by the ear of prophecy, God saying to Jesus], **“Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool** [This is the divine announcement of the inauguration of Messiah's Kingdom which shall endure and spread and increase until God has put all enemies under His feet, the last enemy being death itself, when those who are Christ's will share in his glorious resurrection at His return (1 Corinthians 15.22-28)].” **Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”**

Now we surely see why this sermon, bold, brilliant, and blessed, was the greatest sermon ever preached! It announced in the most thrilling and undeniable terms that Christ died “for us” – that God “raised Him up” and He lives for evermore – that He ascended into heaven, took captive the dark powers of sin and made a spectacle of them, and gave gifts to men from His might throne from when He will rule in righteousness and grace over all that believe in Him until the consummation of all things. Good news! Good news! The Kingdom of God is here!