

## Studies in the Book of Acts – Part 8

**“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.” Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.” – Acts 2.37-41.**

In our last few studies, we’ve been examining what happened on the Day of Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thousands of Jews from all over the world were gathered in Jerusalem for the feast, and the apostles, in accordance with Jesus’ instruction, were gathered in a room, probably in the Temple complex, in prayer, waiting **“for power from on high”** and **“the promise of the Father”**: when **“suddenly there came a sound from heaven, like a rushing mighty wind and filled the place where they were sitting... and something like fire appeared and separated into the twelve parts in the shapes of tongues and rested over the heads of the apostles.”**

The Bible says that this was the **“baptism, or immersion, or overwhelming with the Holy Spirit”** (predicted by John the Baptist) and when it happened, the apostles began to speak **“the wonderful works of God”** **“as the Spirit gave them utterance”** – but the Bible says they were not speaking their native language: they were speaking in other languages – more than a dozen in fact; languages that they had never studied and that they themselves could not have understood, but were the “mother tongues” of the people who were visiting in Jerusalem from throughout

the world. This amazing phenomenon drew a crowd together, and **Peter** stood up to explain what was happening.

Why Peter? Because Jesus selected him in particular for a special work in announcing the establishment and terms of entrance into His Kingdom on Earth.

In Matthew 16.18-19, Jesus said: **“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”**

Peter appealed to the Prophet Joel, who predicted the **“outpouring of the Holy Spirit”** as the inaugural sign of Messiah’s Reign, and then he preached about Jesus – His ministry, His death, His resurrection, and His ascension into Heaven – His coronation and exaltation by God – and he announced: **“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... God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ”** (Acts 2.36).

Picking up in verse 37, the Bible says, **“Now when they** [that is, the crowd of listeners] **heard this** [that is, Peter’s explanation of the strange events and sermon about Jesus], **they were cut to the heart...**” This expression **“cut to the heart”** is variously rendered in English. Some translations say, “pricked” or “stung” which might sound like a minor annoyance; “cut” or “pierced” better captures the intensity, but the 18<sup>th</sup> century paraphrase of Edward Harwood might capture the meaning most vividly: **“Upon hearing this they were pierced with the most cutting anguish and remorse of conscience—and in great distress of mind coming about Peter, and about the other apostles, they cried out — Brethren! what shall we do!”** That is the meaning – “cutting anguish, remorse of conscience, and distress of mind.” One translation says they experienced “compunction,” which, I must admit, was a new word for me. The

definition is: “a feeling of guilt or moral scruple that prevents or follows the doing of something bad” or, put another way, *conviction*. These people were “brought under conviction.”

That is a very religious expression. It is common in preaching and the lyrics of spiritual songs, and according to most theologians, conviction is a work of the Holy Spirit. The reason most say this, is because Jesus said it in John 16.7-10, when He promised and prophesied the coming of Spirit after He left the world: **“Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.”** The Helper of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit will come, and when He comes He will convict the world.

However, there are some difficulties with this scripture. First, the word “**convict**,” although it is an improvement over the Old KJV’s choice of “**reprove**,” may give the impression that all of the things Jesus mentions: sin, righteousness, and judgement, would relate to the *world*, because our version says that world would be convicted “**of**” these things. This is confusing, because it doesn’t make sense that the same world would be convicted of sin and of righteousness. So, some translations, such as the RSV, say “**He will convince the world about sin righteousness and judgment...**” That better captures the meaning, but perhaps come across to cold and intellectual – there was certainly something deeply emotional implied in these words as well – so it is best to put the two idea together: the Spirit would convince the world about these subjects, or as the NRSV says, “**he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment...**” (which helps even more in getting the meaning) and the result will be an emotional wrestling and anguish over the truths now understood.

All of the points addressed by the Spirit relate to Jesus Himself. The Spirit would convict the world of the sin of “**not believing**” Jesus, that is, rejecting Him, which was most poignantly manifest in His crucifixion. The “**righteousness**” is not the world’s, but Christ’s himself. The Spirit would vindicate the claims of Jesus that He had come from the Father by proving the He returned to the Father; and the “**judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged**” speaks of the pronouncement of doom against the authorities and powers, even unto Satan himself, who wickedly and falsely condemned Jesus to death. All of this was accomplished, or began to be accomplished, on the Day of Pentecost – and it was all the work of the Spirit.

We should not be surprised by that in any sense, because from the start, the Spirit is the working power in everything: the miraculous signs were “**by the Spirit**”; the ability to speak the other languages was “**as the Spirit gave utterance**”; and the *conviction of the assembly* was “**by the Spirit**” – yet the Spirit, in that last sense, worked *through* the preaching of Peter.

We mustn’t miss the fact that Luke eagerly reports the work of the Holy Spirit all throughout the book of Acts, but when he explains how persons become Christians, the Holy Spirit is never mentioned as the direct operative! We know He is at work, but it is through the preaching of the gospel by human agents.

In Zechariah 12.10, that prophet foresaw this event and described it thusly: “**And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.**” This is a remarkable prophecy about the crucifixion of Jesus and the conviction of its perpetrators, and Zechariah says that “**vision of the pierced One**” and the mourning from the realization of personal responsibility for it will arise from the God’s outpouring of “**the Spirit of grace and supplication**” – but when it happens in Acts 2, it is not a *feeling* that comes from some mystical vision or internal experience - this

crowd was convicted by *words* they “**heard**” from a preacher. Words that directly corresponded to the prophecy of the Spirit’s work that Jesus himself announced: through Peter’s sermon, the world, represented in those Jews, was convinced and convicted that they had sinned in rejecting God’s Christ (verses 22-23); that Jesus was truly who He claimed to be, and God proved it by raising Him up – not “**leaving His soul in Hades or allowing His flesh to see corruption**” (24-31); and that the wicked forces of the world who put themselves in league with Satan as enemies of Jesus were judged and doomed to destruction – they will be “**made into His footstool**” and “**destroyed**” (33-35).

In the same way, the Spirit continues to work through the proclamation of the inspired word, even to the present time, in convincing and convicting the world about these matters concerning Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 14.24-25, Paul says, “**But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.**”

Through the preaching of Peter, that crowd was brought to a true vision of the one “**they had pierced,**” as John Newton described his own awakening to the consciences of these truths: “I saw One hanging on a tree, in agony and blood, who fixed His languid eyes on me, as near the cross I stood. Sure, never till my latest breath, can I forget that look: it seemed to charge me with His death, though not a word He spoke. My conscience felt and owned the guilt, and plunged me in despair; I saw **my sins** His blood had split, and helped to nail Him there.” To this experience Luke refers when he says they were: “**cut to the heart**” – it is the birth of faith, and as Paul tells us in Romans 10.17, it “**comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.**” This is such a thrilling and meaningful truth to us! If we desire to know God and to have life through Jesus, we don’t have to sit by the roadside begging and crying out: “Pass me not oh gentle savior! Hear my humble cry! While on other thou art calling do not

pass me by!” Christ is seeking all of us! When the gospel is preached to you, the Holy Spirit is speaking to you and it is for you to listen and hear!

But this experience is not the sum total of conversion. In Acts 7.54, Luke describes another crowd, who heard a very similar sermon, and they too were **“cut to the heart”** – but their reaction was to murder the preacher! Here in Acts 2, we learn the proper response of faith which sets apart perfected, saving faith from dead faith – verse 37 continues: they **“said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, what shall we do?’”** This is an interesting question, because already, Peter has declared, **“That whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved”** (Acts 2.21). Yet these men evidently understood that expression meant something more than simply shouting out the name of Jesus or even praying a cry of supplication for deliverance. To **“call on the name of the LORD”** carries the idea of submission to the authority of God, and therefore, the question: **“What must we do?”** was very reasonable and natural. William Carver accurately identifies the meaning of this question by the context: “They have been shown to be in direct conflict with God, and the wicked murderers of Jesus, their Christ. How can they get right with God and wash out the stain of murder and the blindness of rejecting the Messiah?”

Verse 38, **“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...’”** This is the answer we should have expected, because this is precisely what Peter and the other apostles were commanded to preach in the great commission before Jesus ascended into heaven: repentance, baptism, and the remission of sins (Luke 24.47; Mark 16.16; Matthew 28.19). To “repent” means much more than to feel sorry or sad – clearly Peter audience already had that emotional sensation, in fact they had a godly sorrow – a grief over their offense to the creator and a desire to be reconciled to Him, as their question expressed. Paul tells us that godly sorrow “leads to, or produces repentance” (2 Corinthians 7.10). Repentance is a “change of heart” – it is an internal shifting of a the will – a change of direction in life that inevitably produces a reformation of

character and behavior when it is genuine. But it is not repentance alone, Peter continues: **“and let every one of you be baptized...”** Translations which simply say, “Be baptized each one of you” are superior here because this is a command, not a permission. Be baptized means “be immersed...” and although water is not mentioned in this verse, immersion in water is what Peter has in mind. We know this for a number of reasons: 1) Peter commands each person in his audience to submit to this immersion. The baptism in the Holy Spirit was never commanded, it was simply promised. Jesus did not command the apostles to be immersed in the Spirit, He said, “Wait, you will be baptized in the Spirit not many days from now.” 2) When we look ahead in the Book of Acts for parallel events to this one, the scripture is very clear that water baptism is what the apostles and evangelists were enjoining on those who wanted to become Christians (Acts 8.36; 10.47-48).

This baptism is **“in the name of Jesus Christ”** which means, **“by the authority of Jesus”** – as when a police officer says to “stop in the name of the law.” It means that one is baptized in recognition of and submission to that authority, and in accordance with Jesus’ teaching and design on what baptism means, in other words: this is baptism the way Jesus commands, on the terms Jesus commands, for the reasons Jesus commands, because Jesus commands it. And the repentance and baptism are both **“for the remission of sins.”** Some translations say, “in order to the forgiveness of sins.” The New Testament in Plain English, the Good News Bible, and the American Translation by Professor J. Edgar Goodspeed say: “so that your sins will be forgiven.” That is the meaning. Jesus used the same expression in Matthew 26.28 when He said that His blood was shed on the cross “for the remission of sins” – so that our sins would be forgiven. Jesus’ sacrifice made it possible for all men to be saved, and Peter explains that repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus makes salvation actual and personal in the life of the one who obeys those instructions.

Then he continues: **“and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”** This is a difficult statement for several reasons. Grammatically this is

called a genitive and only the context can tell us if it is a genitive of possession, in which case it could also be translated “the Holy Spirit’s gift” and it means something that the Spirit gives to someone, or the genitive of apposition in which case the Holy Spirit is the gift. In this context alone, it may not be possible to identify the precise meaning of this statement. But there are a few things we should remember: whatever the Bible may say in other places about the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Church or the Holy Spirit and the Christian, or the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian, in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit is introduced in a miraculous context, doing wonderful signs on earth in order to establish that Jesus Christ is ruling from heaven and graciously welcoming men into His Kingdom. In John’s prophecy of the baptism in the Holy Spirit in Luke 3.16, John contrasted “baptism in the Spirit” and “baptism in fire” as the two great signs of the Messiah’s authority on earth. The message was that Messiah would bring blessings and judgments to Israel and which one you received depended on whether or accepted or rejected Him. What is happening here in Acts 2 is a fulfillment of John’s prophecy and at the very least, Peter is saying if you repent and are baptized so that your sins will be forgiven you will become a partaker in blessings in Kingdom of Jesus Christ. There may be much more than that implied in the expression “you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,” but this is certainly one thing that the original audience would have understood by Peter’s words. This becomes more evident when Peter continues in verse 39: **“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.”** The **“promise”** must be the gospel itself – supremely manifest in the kingdom of Christ. Peter says, it **“is to you and to your children”** that is, to the Jewish people, **“and to all who are afar off”** that is, the Gentile people (Ephesians 2.11-13). Peter is going to struggle with this later in his life and work, but Jesus already announced that His gospel was for **“every creature”** from **“all nations”** in **“all the world.”** **“As many as the Lord our God will call...”** the NASB says, **“will call to Himself.”** This calling is through the preaching of the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2.14). So Peter is here announcing that the Kingdom of Christ is open to the Jews – it will

extend to the Gentiles – it will continue for perpetual generations – and it will expand to the extremities of God’s sovereign purpose.

Verse 40: “**And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation.’**” This is one of the longest sermons recorded in the New Testament, but it is only a sample, some even think just an outline, of what Peter preached. Luke says that Peter “**testified**” – that is, he bore witness about Christ; and he “**exhorted**” – that is he entreated, or plead with, or urged his listeners to do something, namely to: “**Be saved from this perverse generation.**” This reinforces our understanding of Peter’s words in verse 38. He is not speaking to saved people, telling them what to do in service to Christ, he is answering the call of sinners who want to know how to be forgiven. The world around may be wicked, hardened, and perverted, but Christ is on His throne and it is possible to “**be saved**” if we only will by obedience to the will of the Lord.

Verse 41 gives the thrilling end of this story: “**Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.**” Notice that “**receiving the word**” is a precondition to baptism – Jesus said, “**he that believes and is baptized shall be saved.**” And they were baptized “**that day.**” We don’t know how long the preaching lasted, but baptizing 3,000 people in or around Jerusalem that same day would have been a monumental and exceedingly difficult task – if there was ever a time to put off baptism for a more convenient moment, it would be here, but that is never what we find in the Book of Acts baptism is “**for the forgiveness of sins**” so it is always urgently attended to as soon as possible! And those who were baptized, we “**added.**” The Greek expression here means that they were joined together into a community, a society, or a congregation.

In all the history of Christianity there has never been a day, a sermon, or a response quite like this one – but the best aspects of Pentecost are not trapped on the pages of history. The same Spirit who convicted them of sin, righteousness, and judgment, was sent to bring you and I to the same

conviction through the preaching of the same gospel. When our hearts are cut and opened to the truth, and we are led to see the one who was “pierced by us” – who was “wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities” – the same answer avails to us: what must we do? We must repent and be immersed by the authority of Jesus the Messiah so that our sins will be forgiven and we shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit! “The Promise is to” us – forever and for all who “the Lord our God shall call to Himself.”