

Part 4: The Promise and the Problem of Conversion

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In the late 1950's a group of heavily armed members of the Mao Mao gang marched on a police station in New York City. The group was led by a man who was called by his own mother, "The Son of Satan," given his brutal and violent character.

As the officers prepared for war, they were shocked at what followed. Much to the surprise of some of the gang members themselves, their infamous leader did not have them discharge their weapons, but instead ordered them to disarm themselves—dumping pistols, knives, brass knuckles, shotguns, and much more at the front door of the station.

The leader's name was Nicky Cruz, and a few days earlier something amazing had happened—he was converted to Christianity. Convinced of God's love for him and convicted of the weight of his sin, his conversion was confounding to those who knew him.

It led many to wonder to themselves, "What does this mean?" Maybe you've had similar experiences in your own life. I know one individual who was quite proficient in four letter words. But when Jesus saved her it was as if she had miraculously unlearned in a moment what was developed over decades. Maybe you're here today because you've seen such change in a family member, or in a co-worker, or maybe you're experiencing your own affections and desires change and you're wondering "What's happening to me!?"

Last week the promise Jesus told the church to wait for finally came. The Holy Spirit came and filled the 120 believers who obeyed Jesus' command to wait in Jerusalem. Filled with the presence of God, the Holy Spirit put the word of God into their mouths in miraculous ways—those who were known as simple began preaching the gospel in different languages so that the multi-ethnic community in Jerusalem was hearing in their own language the "mighty works of God."

This led all of those who had previously known these disciples to ask themselves that same question: "What is going on?" Luke tells us in **Acts 2:12-13**, that some wondered sincerely asking "What does this mean?" Others wondered skeptically, mocking the believers saying, "They are filled with new wine."

It's not uncommon for those around Christians to see the fruit of faith in their life and say in their own words, "Yeah, this will wear off. It's just a fad. Give it time and these guys will go back to their old life and look just like the rest of us." But what we see in our passage today is the while the events in Acts 2 are accompanied with miraculous signs we aren't to expect today—the same miraculous promise is still at work in the lives of any who are saved. But this promise for some, is a problem for others.

This will be our main point this morning: **Converted Christians show the reality of man's problem and God's promise.** If you have your Bibles open, in verses 12-21 we will see our first point: **The Promise of a God Who Is Not Done**, and in the following verses (22-37) we will see **The Problem of a Jesus Who Is Not Dead.**

It might be interesting to note this morning, that what we are looking at is the contents of the first sermon in the Christian church. Peter, standing among the apostles preaches a sermon that is rooted in the Old Testament, rich with theology, filled with Jesus and is equally evangelistic as it is apologetic.

This sermon begins as a defense—he starts not by addressing the first question, but instead those who wanted to mock this experience and categorize it as something ordinary at best, and inappropriate at worst.

Luke tells us Peter stood, lifted up his voice and said, **Acts 2:14-15**, "Men of Judea, and all who dwell in Jerusalem. Let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day."

It's common to laugh at Peter's rhetorical sass here. He's in essence saying they aren't drunk because it's hardly breakfast time. But don't neglect how this expresses an important reality: the world often struggles to understand the church because it only has worldly categories to explain supernatural joys.

My oldest daughter gets these wild eyes when she begins to understand something she previously struggled with. She gets giggly, and jittery when the math concept begins to make sense to her. My guess is this is what was seen here. These men and women, led by the Holy Spirit in languages unknown, began to proclaim the mighty works of God—probably had a similar sense of "I can't believe I get to understand this!" joy. There was a supernatural community, taken up in a supernatural miracle, proclaiming with supernatural joy the supernatural beauty of the gospel.

Such fellowship, excitement and diversity of sounds might have resembled the joy of a tap house more than the community who attended the temple. While the world often conceals the dark and violent side of drunkenness, what draws people to it is the illusion of freedom and community.

But what the world cannot understand, and what it searches for at bottom of bottles or in the caverns of bed sheets—the Christian finds in the joy of our conversion. **Ephesians 5:18-20**, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

What the Christian experiences in the reality of the Spirit is infinitely better than what the world offers. And this exuberant and supernatural community was displayed in a miraculous way on Pentecost to stress our first point this morning: **The Promise of a God Who is Not Done**.

It is the prophet Joel, not gin, which explains the experience of the Christian: **Acts 2:16-21**, "But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and vapor of smoke; 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.'"

Peter quotes Joel 2 to show that what seemed new, was actually the fulfillment of what they had long hoped for. The context of Joel is that while Israel was torn apart by sin, God was going to fill them with his Spirit, and this will save them from judgement and restore them to God.

Peter shows how this promise of God signifies two distinct changes happening in that moment.

First, it indicates ***A Change in Spirit.***

Peter said, “Remember that day of restoration you hoped in? That day when God’s Spirit wouldn’t dwell in a foreign temple, but in the hearts of his people? That day is now! God’s Spirit has come to restore his people!”

Peter is tying the miraculous multi-lingual proclamation of the gospel to Joel’s promise of all God’s people being prophets. There’s debate among certain some Christian churches whether Peter here implies that any Christian who receives the Holy Spirit must be able to have visions or prophecy, and they define prophecy as some previously unknown information. Those are important questions to work through, but for the time being our context helps us out a little bit too.

Peter is not giving a sermon on spiritual gifts, nor is he making a rule for what it looks like anytime someone is saved. He is though, explaining why there is such miraculous and wonderful things happening at that time. In that moment, God was pouring out his Spirit on all his people for the first time in redemptive history and it’s being validated by some miraculous signs.

In the book of Luke, Jesus used miracles early and often in his ministry to validate the claim that he was God’s messiah doing God’s work. But as Luke went on, the miracles became less frequent but his teaching became more central. So too in the book of Acts, the pouring out of the Spirit and the miracles of the Apostles validate the church as the continuation of Jesus’ work, but as the book goes on it’s the miracle of conversion by faith in Jesus which takes center stage.

It’s this conversion which is tied up even in this miracle. Peter point out how in contrast to the Old Testament, this Spirit is poured out on all who believe. And we see how it’s only conversion and the work of the Spirit who can make us into who we actually want to be. The church performs less and less miracles so as to show that the church is the miracle! And we already see that here.

Do you remember Peter’s brash boldness according to his own flesh in Luke 22? “Lord, I’ll die for you!” But a few hours after that Peter was asked by small girl if he knew Jesus and he was scared of her opinion that he denied Jesus—a far cry from dying for him. We also saw in Luke 24, and Acts 1, the disciples wrestling to understand the Old Testament apart from the help of Jesus. But here Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit has new clarity on God’s word as relevant to the moment, and he boldly stands up to the crowds that days ago crucified Jesus.

If you are a Christian, you are filled with this same Spirit. Such transformation might not happen as quickly as Peter’s did, but it doesn’t happen any less effectively. Do you want to know what it looks like to be filled with the Holy Spirit? Read God’s word and share God’s word with boldness. Trust that his promise will grow according to the promise he has given you in his Spirit.

But Peter also points out the coming of the Holy Spirit also indicates ***The Change in Seasons.***

Peter ties the coming of the Spirit with the beginning of the final chapter of history. Notice how he says, “And in the last days it shall be,” (vs. 17) and he ends with “before the day of the Lord comes” (vs. 20).

For the Jews, the day of the Lord synonymous with the conclusion of God's redemptive story. It's the curtain call where God judges sin and saves his people. But what Peter is saying here is that now that the Spirit has been poured out on the believers, we are in the last chapter.

If you take a road trip you'll often see signs that say, "Next rest stop 100 miles." Peter here is giving us a similar sign. He says you are here at the sign of the Spirit. "Next stop is the sun turning to blood and the apocalyptic signs of Jesus coming back again." Those terrible sounding signs of blood and darkness in vs. 20 are picked up by John in Revelation 6:12 in describing the final day when Jesus returns, the day of the Lord.

Why is this important for us to understand? Because it explains two things about our lives and about our world. God is continuing to make himself known—and the primary way he's doing it now is through the proclamation of his gospel through his Spirit-filled church. We are God's sign to the watching world. The next sign, the one which will not be missed—is the day when Jesus comes back to judge the living and the dead. You might miss the wonder of the church in this season, but no one will miss the glory of Jesus in the next.

But that's the second reason why this is important. When the day comes it symbolizes the imminent reality of judgement. If the word pictures of this text sound terrible, we can imagine the reality of judgement for those who do not believe is far worse. One early church pastor said in reflecting on this text: "There is therefore a hell, O man! And God is good."

And here we see how that just God is also a mercifully good God. While the final sign of God's work indicates judgement—the sign of the church at work in the world is meant to show the offer of grace being declared right up until the clock expires. We proclaim that anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved from that day of judgment.

Here's where the rub is for these Jews, and here's the danger of assumption even for us today: They would have long assumed that this prophecy of fullness and of salvation would have been automatically credited to them. They were Jews! They knew God. They went to temple. They said their prayers.

Yet, they did not have the Spirit. In other words Peter is saying, there is a crash coming, but if you have your seatbelt on—symbolized in the promise of God through the Spirit—you will be safe. But what these men are seeing is that they do not have that seatbelt on. They thought they called on the Lord, yet they don't have the Spirit. Why? How can we make sure we do not make the same fatal assumption?

This is our second point: **The problem of a Jesus who is not dead.**

Peter continues: **Acts 2:22-23**, "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--this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."

You've got to love the logic of a man who most thought of as a simple fisherman! Do you see what he did here? He says: You want to know what's happening? God's at work, Yahweh is keeping his promise. So why don't you have it? Do you remember Jesus? The guy who you thought was just from Nazareth? The guys whose miracles you ignored? Do you remember when you crucified him?

Peter isn't reminding these Jews of this because they forgot. He's reminding them because they have yet to understand the problem of their actions. These Jews did in real life what we can do in our hearts. They didn't know what to make of Jesus, so they made him go away. Maybe some didn't want to kill Jesus, but in the end they are fine with him no longer challenging their lives. We don't really want to wrestle with ideas that to lose our life is to gain it and to be the least is to be the greatest.

You might be open to what Jesus says about benevolence and love, but less so about sexuality and selfishness. If you polled most of the world, they probably have a positive opinion regarding Jesus. But that's the point Peter is making—it's easy to be comfortable with Jesus when he's dead.

But why is he dead? **Acts 2:23**, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."

The great preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones says of this verse that it presents a mystery and a problem. The mystery: how was Jesus delivered up by God's plan and also by sinners? The problem: despite God's sovereign involvement in it—you killed him. You can try to answer the issues of sovereignty but first you've got to solve the issue of sin.

These Jews physically put Jesus to death on the cross and held him there by nails—that's a problem. But the mystery is that the Jesus wasn't held to the cross only by nails. The infinite God could not be held by anything man used, he hung on the cross because for the sins of all his church, he willingly held himself there.

Your sin, my sin, our unbelief, our false assumptions, and our arrogant self-righteousness put him there. Yet he chose to be there because this was the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. Why?

Because Jesus wasn't done. (**Acts 2:24**) "God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it."

The picture painted in the Greek here is a mixed metaphor of death, being pregnant with Jesus, like a woman in labor. She could not hold him. Death was unable to hold back its child—born again to life.

The Jesus who they sought to silence came back to life! But we've seen things like this before. Lazarus was raised but he eventually died again too. We've just got to endure long enough and we'll be good, we'll be rid of this Jesus nagging at our conscience.

But here Peter, quotes Psalm 16, which was basically a song of national pride celebrating the enduring strength of David, the hero king who God would not abandon to death: **Acts 2:25-28**, "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.'"

But under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter points out the truer meaning of this: **Acts 2:29-32**, "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 on 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 are all witnesses."

Brothers, David wasn't talking about David. You can find his grave today. David, spoke about the true Holy One, the true King, the true descendent to his throne, Jesus Christ. He will not be corrupted by death—and God just proved that to you.

Notice how there's no debate about the resurrection. He assumes they saw it. He says they are all witnesses. But here we see again that sight means nothing apart from the Spirit.

But then Peter goes on even more: **Acts 2:33-36**, "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into heaven but he himself says, 'The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.' Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus, whom you crucified."

This right here is the first every showing of the popular TV series, "Undercover Boss."

In our first point Peter says that Pentecost can only be explained by the fulfillment of God's wonderful promise. But now he points out why they are not experiencing it.

"Do you remember that guy? The guy you killed, that guy who you thought was just a man, just Jesus of Nazareth, that guy was God. And you killed him. And guess what—you can't kill him again. Remember death, that cruel lover that takes every one of us—well, this Jesus kicked him in the teeth. And now, he has ascended back to the CEO suite, he's undercover no more, he's not veiled in weakness, he's not empty of honor, and he's not void in power. You made him dead, but God made him Lord and Christ. And if Jesus whooped up on death itself, making it look like the weakest flower in the field, what do you think, O' man, he will do to those who put him to death?"

Here, their question at long last is answered: What does this mean? What does it mean that these people are so filled with the Holy Spirit, so preoccupied with proclaiming the mighty works of God and so content in their sweet communion?

"This that you yourselves are seeing and hearing is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the vindication of the rule and reign of the undefeatable, unkillable, incorruptible, unending king of glory under whom all his enemies are his footstool. And guess what—you have been his enemy.

Did you know how powerfully offensive your conversion is to the lost? Your conversion, if you are a believer—is God's testimony by work and by your words that he is not dead, but we will come back to judge the living and the dead. How do you explain your conversion? What has happened to you? You've been brought to life by the one who is life himself, and you've been filled with his Spirit. Just as Jesus was incorruptible in death, we will be untouchable in the day of judgement—Christ has been judged for us.

So, if you stand here today and you find yourself like these men, to be an outsider to this wonderful work—then take heed. This is still the age of the Spirit, today is not the day of the Lord, but tomorrow might be. So we would invite you not to wonder at us, but to worship with us. Call upon the name of the

Lord in Jesus Christ. Die to yourself and live for him. Repent of your sins and find his grace sweeter than the weight of your sin.

Paul says this, **2 Corinthians 2:14-17**, "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ."

To be saved by Jesus is to have the promise of our sin overcome by the promise of God's grace. So dear believer, live in light of that. Live in such a way so all the world might say about you: "What does this mean?" And you might answer with the wonderful story of grace, grace that saved a wretch like you, and grace that is big enough to save anyone who calls on the name of the Lord.