

Acts 2:16-21 The Beginning of the End

The Word of the Lord from Acts 2:17: Peter said, "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Dear friends, you are living in the last days and the end of the world draws near. I don't say this because of anything in the news today, but because of our text from Acts 2.

Our text is the start of something big, and it happens on the festival of Pentecost. Pentecost is the Greek name for the Old Testament Feast of Weeks that God required the Israelites to celebrate. He commanded that they celebrate it seven weeks after the Passover—thus it was called the Feast of Weeks because it took place a "week of weeks" after the Paschal Feast. That means the feast was celebrated on the fiftieth day—that's the "Pente" in Pentecost.

What happened between Passover and Pentecost? The barley harvest. The Passover signaled the start of the harvest: in fact, during the Passover week the first sheaves of barley were offered to God as a sacrifice. The Passover feast itself, though, wasn't about the harvest. It was a remembrance of how God had delivered His people from Egypt: as the Jews celebrated the Passover meal, they remembered how their ancestors had put the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts, and how God had spared their firstborn sons.

Who was to make the trip? Every Jewish man, no matter where he lived. That's why you'd find a crowd of Parthians, Medes, Elamites and all the rest in Jerusalem at the same time in Acts 2. After they came to Jerusalem for the Passover, they went home to harvest the barley. Fifty days later, they assembled in Jerusalem again in order to give thanks for God's abundant provision at Pentecost.

So the Lord commanded Passover and Pentecost so that His people might remember His deliverance and provision. But there was more to it than that: way back in the Old Testament, He commanded these feasts to point to Jesus. It is no coincidence that Jesus was crucified at the Passover, because He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And it's no coincidence that the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost: it is time for the apostles to go out and make disciples of all nations. In other words: because Christ has died and Christ is risen from the dead, it is time for the apostles to sow the seed of His Word. It is time to ready for the harvest.

So the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost, the harvest festival. He comes with the sound of a loud rushing wind and tongues of fire above the heads of God's people, some special effects to announce His arrival. He is there to do what Jesus said He would do in our Gospel lesson: He is to convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment. He is there to testify of Jesus to all who will hear, by means of His holy Word.

So Pentecost is a big day. The wait is over. The Holy Spirit comes. The apostles start to preach. It's the birthday of the Church. It's the start of the harvest.

It is also the beginning of the end.

When we think about Bible texts which speak about the end times, we normally think of Revelation or Daniel or Matthew 24. But we should add Acts 2 to the list. The Holy Spirit comes, the crowds gather and people ask, "What does this mean?" In response, Peter begins by quoting from the prophet Joel to explain what it means. He tells them that Pentecost is a fulfillment of the prophecy from long before which says:

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.

"And in the last days," begins the prophecy: the Spirit of God will be poured out in the last days, and the Spirit of God has just been poured. Ergo, they are living in the last days in Acts 2. Not only does God promise to send the Spirit in that time, but He also promises wonders—wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below. Namely: before the day of the Lord when He comes to judge, there will be blood and fire and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood. We see the Spirit poured out in our text: when do the rest of these signs take place? The sign of blood has just taken place fifty days before: Jesus has been crucified for the sins of the world. What about fire and vapor of smoke? In the Old Testament, fire and smoke were symbolic of God's presence on earth: think of the top of Mt. Sinai when the Lord descended there to give the Ten Commandments, or think of Moses and the burning bush. Now, in Acts 2, when has the Lord been most recently present? On the cross. In the tomb. Risen with His disciples. Ascending into heaven. This prophecy is all about Jesus—God present on earth in His life, His death and resurrection, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit. This prophecy is all about that specific Passover and that Pentecost.

That time is the beginning of the Church. It's also the beginning of the end. Peter declares that the people are living in the last days—why? Because all that is necessary for salvation has been accomplished. Because Christ has died and risen again, and because the Holy Spirit has come, God's plan for man's redemption is complete. The world could end at any time. It only remains because the Lord patiently waits for more to hear and believe and be saved.

Now, if those people in Acts 2 were living in the last days of this world, it is that much more true for you. You are living in the last days, and the end is getting ever nearer. That makes this a matter of urgency: what do you do to make sure that you are ready for the great and glorious day of the Lord when He comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead?

The crowd will ask this a little later on in Acts 2, once Peter's done preaching. His sermon goes on to pierce them to the heart: after he quotes Joel, he goes on to declare, "You know that Messiah you've been waiting for, for centuries? He has come. His name is Jesus...and you killed Him just seven weeks ago." Convicted of their sin, they'll ask Peter, "What shall we do?" How can they make up for what they have done? How can they be ready for the great and magnificent day of the Lord?

Peter will tell them in Acts 2:38-39: "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. 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."

There's gospel for you. What must they do to make up for their sin? The truth is that there is nothing they can do that could make up for it. So instead, says Peter, repent. Turn from sin and works-righteousness, and acknowledge your need for grace. Be baptized, because that is where Jesus Christ gives you the forgiveness He has won on the cross. That's where you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's not just for the grown-ups in the crowd that day. It is for their children. It is for those who are far off,

both Jews and Gentiles. It's even for young children far away in space and time, like those in Linn and Palmer, Kansas (Even if they move to the ends of the earth, or even !) That's why we rejoice everytime a baptism occurs, and especially we rejoice that we are baptized, because the Lord promises forgiveness and His Spirit by water and the Word; and where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

That is for you. Scripture declares again and again that we cannot make up for our sins by what we do. One passage among many is Romans 3:20, which begins, "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight." Ephesians 2:8-9 adds, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." It is all gift, that you might be sure that you are pleasing to God even now, that you are ready for the Last Day.

That's what baptism does: it gives forgiveness of sins. It gives life. In Acts 2, three thousand men who heard Peter's sermon were baptized. Of course, life must be nurtured, so Christianity doesn't end there. What did those newly-baptized do? The next verse tells you that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." They continued to

nurture the life they'd received by hearing the Word, for God gives life in His Word—remember and ponder our first lesson from Ezekiel. And they devoted themselves to the fellowship, the breaking of the bread—for in that Holy Communion, Jesus gives His own body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

I have heard it said: "Leave it to the Lutherans to make the Holy Spirit boring." We don't, really: we just say what the Bible says about Him. Now I would add, "Leave it to the Lutherans to make the end times boring." What will the last days be like? Just like the present day, because Peter declares that we are in the last days, for all that must happen before the end of the world has happened. The Lord could return at any time. Even if He waits, your last day draws near. How can you be sure that you are ready for Judgment? Simple. "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. 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." This is the glad confidence given to you by grace. You're ready for the end because Jesus Christ has died in your place, for your sin. The price is paid; and in Christ you are righteous before God even now. For His sake, you live in these last days with the assurance and joy that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen