

50 Days of Wonder: He Ascended Into Heaven: 4

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn up to Acts chapter 2, shall we, if you have a Bible in front of you. This is the long sermon on the day of Pentecost. Actually, it's not so long. It takes about two and a half minutes to read.

Or if you read it dramatically, probably three. This is the second last in our little series on 50 Days of Wonder. Next week, we're going to be looking at the actual day of Pentecost at the beginning of the chapter.

But our great privilege today is to look at the first Christian sermon on that day when the Holy Spirit was poured out from heaven and God's people began to witness, to speak and to prophesy fire and wind.

And we're looking at the sermon which comes, it begins in verse 14 and goes to about verse 41. Not just because it's an absolute cracker.

3,000 plus people became Christians on the spot. But this is also where the 50 Days of Wonder ends. 40 days, Jesus, between the resurrection and the ascension, Jesus had been appearing to his disciples and teaching them from the Old Testament, a sort of extended seminar.

[1 : 20] At the end of that 40 days, as we looked at last week, he ascended into heaven. He said, wait for the Holy Spirit. And this is the day, perhaps 10 days later, when the Holy Spirit fell.

And it represents a completely new moment in God's dealing with the world. And what's the first thing that happens when the Holy Spirit falls? What's the first thing that happens when the Holy Spirit fills people, fills his followers?

It is that they speak about what God has done in Jesus Christ. And the crowd can hear these things and can see these things, but they don't understand what's going on.

And as we look at this sermon a little briefly this morning, it is an announcement on earth of what's going on in heaven.

Something remarkable has happened in heaven. God has made Jesus Lord. And this is announced on earth. It's not just a polite explanation. The sermon itself causes things to happen.

[2 : 24] And we're meant to get the picture that this is the way the risen and ascended Jesus Christ now continues to teach and to act from heaven. It's as the gospel is preached.

So every time the gospel is preached, it ought to be that our eyes are opened again and we have this earth-shattering discovery of what's going on in heaven.

And I can't think of anything more important for us today to look at. To go back and to hear the original, the essential Christian message. And I want to do it with you just asking this question.

What is the core message of Christianity? Christianity. And Peter makes, broadly speaking, three things, three parts. There are three things that constitute the core of the Christian message.

The first is this, and it comes in the introduction. Like every good sermon, there's an introduction. And Peter's introduction goes from verses 14 to 21. And the first thing is this, the core message of Christianity is that it's a word of judgment and salvation from God.

[3 : 36] Now some preachers talk about their introductions using golf terms. They talk about waggling on the tee, you know, getting set with the ball. Peter doesn't do that.

But he dives straight into it. And if you look at the text, you see the indented verses 17 to 21. He begins with a long quote from the Old Testament prophet Joel, which shows he's been listening very carefully to Jesus over the last 40 days.

Jerusalem is in party mode. It would be the ancient Near Eastern equivalent of Mardi Gras. Thousands of people have come from all over the world. And Peter stands up, says, listen up.

He says, look, it's nine o'clock in the morning. The pubs have been closed for a long time. It's too early for any of us to be drunk. And then he plunges straight into this Old Testament quote from Joel, which would have been completely familiar to his hearers, but perhaps not so much to us now, right?

The book of Joel, which is a wonderful, beautiful book, is a heartbreaking call from God to his people to come back to him.

[4 : 52] I quote from it, return to me with all your heart, says God. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And the reason they must return, God says, is because he has set a day, the day of the Lord.

The book of Joel is about the day of the Lord, the great and terrible day of the Lord. It is the day of judgment for all peoples, all tribes, all men, all women, everywhere.

This is basic to the Christian message. Because the world that you and I live in is full of violence, full of injustice, because we have run away from God and tried to play God and we've made a complete mess of it.

And there's only one who has the power and the purity to be able to judge this world. I mean, this week, as you watch the tears of the families of those who died in the Malaysian airline that was shot down by a missile over the Ukraine, didn't it deepen your longing for justice?

You know, how will justice come for those families? Or how will justice come for the victims who have died? Not just in the Ukraine, but just draw a line.

[6 : 12] Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Israel, Nigeria. How will justice come for us or for those whom we have hurt? And the answer the Bible gives us is the day of the Lord.

This is where the Christian message starts. It starts by saying things are much worse than you can possibly believe. And it says at the same time, things are far better than you could possibly imagine.

Because the true beauty of the book of Joel is not just that God will bring justice one day, but that before that day, he offers relief and hope and restoration and redemption by his pure grace and mercy.

And I'm coming to the point, the way in which God will do that is by pouring out his Holy Spirit. And that explains the big chunk that Peter quotes from the book of Joel.

The point of that passage is that God's promise is, I will pour out my spirit on all flesh. It is the beautiful, generous, undeserved deluge of God on all people, not irrespective of whether they want it or whether they believe it, but all people irrespective of what we've done and of our status.

[7 : 31] And Peter says, that's exactly what has just happened. And we have reached now the final stage in God's saving plan before the great and terrible day.

And the reason God has poured out his Holy Spirit on his believers is that now every believer, every male and female servant of God should prophesy and speak about the glory of Jesus Christ.

That's what's going on. What has happened in heaven is not disconnected from what goes on on earth here. What's happened in heaven must now be proclaimed in every tongue, to every person, in every place.

That is the point of Pentecost. All nations must hear this good news and all Christians must tell this good news. That means that every Christian is a prophet.

We believe in the prophethood of all believers. You've heard of the priesthood of all believers. We believe every Christian is a priest and every Christian is a royal person. But we also believe every Christian is a prophet.

[8 : 41] And the way in which God gives the Holy Spirit into the hearts of people throughout history now until the day of the Lord is as they hear Christians proclaiming God's message of salvation, the way in which God's salvation and offer comes to the people of Vancouver, it's through Christians in Vancouver who speak the word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So this is the introduction. And Peter gets to the end of the introduction. He finishes opening in verse 21 by saying this. If you just look down at verse 21, it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

So if the core message of Christianity starts with the word of judgment and salvation from God, the obvious question then is, who is this Lord? How can we know him?

And that brings us to the second point, or really to the sermon proper. You don't worry, do you, when I have long, long introductions to sermons? Nobody's ever complained about it.

But that's a fairly lengthy intro for Peter. But far more is this second issue from verses 22 to 36, where we learn that the core message of Christianity is not just a word of judgment and salvation from God, but it's judgment and salvation from God through the person of Jesus Christ.

[10 : 08] Do you not find it remarkable that on the day when the Holy Spirit's poured out, Peter does not preach about the Holy Spirit. He preaches about Jesus.

And the main body of this sermon is all about Jesus and four things about Jesus, four acts in Jesus' life, if you will. See verse 22, he starts, men of Israel, and there are women there too, hear these words, Jesus of Nazareth.

That's where he hits his driver down the fairway. What's fascinating is that the way Peter preaches the good news is he points out that it is a massive case of mistaken identity.

Now, mistaken identity is a major part of comedies and tragedies. If you are a Shakespeare fan, a bard on the beach usually does Twelfth Night, and, you know, babies are switched at birth, and they're mistaken for each other, despite the fact that one's a boy and one's a girl.

I don't want to spoil it for you if you haven't seen it. There's disguise and there's confusion. There's gradual revelation and then final revelation. But in real life, a mistaken identity can be either very funny or tragic.

[11 : 29] Last week, I heard a story about a hit man who had been arrested, who worked for the mafia, who turned state's evidence, and he'd killed a number of people.

And he was out on parole somewhere in Quebec, and he was driving at peak hour, and another motorist got very angry with him and pulled him over and went around the window to begin to threaten him.

And evidently, the parole board were very pleased with the fact that Mr. Mafia Hitman was completely self-controlled. The thing I like about that story the most is that the guy who got angry and threatened this guy had absolutely no idea who he was talking to.

This is at the core of the proclamation of the Christian message. The world that you and I live in is caught up in a massive conflict about Jesus. Not whether he existed, but whether he is the touchstone of existence.

Whether he is the source of life and light, the key to all, the centre of what God is doing. And if we don't, if we mistake Jesus' identity, it can end in absolute tragedy.

[12 : 44] Look at the way Peter does this over the four acts of Jesus' life. The first two are Jesus' life, and his death in verses 22 and 23. And if you look down at those verses, you can see that Peter is not politically correct.

He's very pointed. He says, you saw the mighty works that God did through Jesus. They were God's demonstrating and attesting that he was his son.

In fact, every word and every action of Jesus, God did through him. And no doubt many in the crowd have witnessed some of these things, but it hadn't made any change or difference in them. They hadn't begun following Jesus with all their hearts because of what they did in verse 22.

And I'll read this verse with you. Verse 23, I'm sorry. This Jesus, he's still on topic, you see, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

This is a remarkable verse, and it says that there's a two-sided involvement in the death of Jesus. It didn't just happen as a nasty accident. The death of Jesus is deeply personal for God and for you and for us.

[14 : 00] Now, I want you to think about this for just a moment. Peter's not beating around the bush. Who is he talking to? He's looking at a very large crowd. This is almost two months after Jesus was crucified.

It's absolutely impossible that it's the same group that were there two months before. This is a different group than those who actually plotted and schemed to execute Jesus.

And Peter looks at the crowd and he says, you crucified and you killed him by the hands of lawless men, meaning, I guess, the Roman Gentile authorities.

Literally, he says, you fixed him up there and destroyed him. What is Peter doing? He's not playing the blame game.

He's not putting a blanket condemnation on Jews as though they're somehow more guilty than the Gentile Romans. What he's doing is what Jesus did and what the Old Testament does.

[15 : 00] He's telling us the truth about ourselves. Because at the core of what is wrong with this world and what is wrong with me and what is wrong with you is a refusal to recognize that Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

At the root of sin and injustice and evil is a rejection of Jesus Christ as God's chosen one. And that's not confined to the high priests or to Judas.

It's a reality in your heart and it's a reality in mine. That the fundamental struggle behind everything that ails our world and it's why the day of the Lord is coming.

You see, we try and impersonalize sin and evil as though it's breaking the rules. You know, God's a God of rules. So long as I don't break any of the big ones like murder, adultery or corporate greed, maybe just murder, adultery, I'm okay.

The Bible says these things are symptoms of the underlying disorder. It seems not abstract.

[16 : 08] It's far more deeply personal. And when push comes to shove, what actually happens in my heart is that I'd rather nail Jesus to the cross than to bow to him as Lord. Sin is very directly and personally aimed at Jesus.

That's the point. And this is part of the proclamation of the gospel. Do you remember when David sinned? I mean, sin's never been just a horizontal reality.

David had sex with his neighbor's wife and then he had his neighbor's wife's husband murdered. And when he comes to confess it in Psalm 51, he says this to God, Lord, against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

And we read that text and say, well, yeah, but how about that bloke you murdered? But David sees what is right, that underneath what energized his desire and his sin was the vertical reality, the rejection of God.

God loves to tell us the truth about ourselves. He doesn't pander to us. He doesn't flatter us. I remember speaking on this passage in a theological seminary and students being deeply offended that Peter would say this.

[17 : 25] But you see, there's a sense in which every time we confess our sins, which we're going to later in the service today, we are saying, I put Jesus up on that cross. I crucified him.

But in the same event of the crucifixion, it's both attributed to our wickedness while at the same time to God's deliberate plan and purpose. because in the Old Testament, God revealed that the Messiah must suffer and be raised and be proclaimed.

I don't have time to sit on this, but this is a very beautiful truth, particularly for those who are suffering or in circumstances that are beyond understanding. Where you've tried things, but things seem to go from bad to worse.

And there's no relief and there's no way out. And it seems as though if Jesus is in the boat, he's asleep on the cushion. Look to the death of Jesus Christ. Because there in that act of great wickedness, God is working his perfect salvation.

And the same is true in our lives. But you see, the thing about mistaken identity, and when you go to these Shakespeare plays or if you watch or read, there comes a moment of what's called where the dramatic illusion is broken, where reality breaks through.

[18 : 43] And after that in the story, people rise or fall around the true identity of what's been revealed. And as Peter goes on to the second two things about Jesus' life, his resurrection and ascension, this is the moment where the illusion is broken.

This is the big reveal, where the verdict of God and the treatment of Jesus are completely overturned, where God makes Jesus' identity plain. So if you just cast your eyes down verse 24 onwards, you see verse 24?

You put him to death, but God raised him up. Verse 32? You put him in the ground, but God raised him up. Verse 33? You rejected him as unnecessary and superfluous and expendable and dispensable, but God has exalted him to the right hand and made him Lord of all.

This is a case of mistaken identity of horrifying magnitude. You could not have more opposite treatment of Jesus. Jesus, in God's view, is the most important human being who has ever lived.

He's the only human that sits at God's right hand and the proof is that he's poured out the Holy Spirit. In fact, Peter says, that's what this Pentecostal pandemonium is all about.

[19 : 56] God has poured out his Spirit on all people to tell what's happened in heaven. And every sermon in the book of Acts, whenever preaching to non-Christians, has at the heart of its focus Jesus and his resurrection because in the resurrection, what God did is overthrew human judgment, all human judgment that relegates Jesus to being unnecessary.

Death could not hold Jesus, not just because he was stronger than death, but because God wouldn't allow it. God had promised that he would be Lord of all. We don't have time for this, but if you cast your eye down, you see Peter preaches Jesus from Old Testament texts, which is what Christian preachers ought to be doing.

And I think in May this year, we looked at, was it May? Was anyone here? I think it was early May. We preached this very Psalm in verses 25 to 28, Psalm 16.

Remember we saw that David was speaking above his pay grade, outside his experience, prophesying about Jesus Christ. That's what the resurrection is. But when it comes to the ascension, Peter pulls it, pulls everything together.

This is the reason for the coming of the Holy Spirit. 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 which you yourselves are seeing and hearing.

[21 : 23] It's quite incredible that the first thing the ascended Jesus does when he gets to heaven is he pours out his spirit offering his enemies forgiveness and his presence.

He drenches his followers in his spirit so that they would proclaim and tell that the Jesus whom they had relegated to the corners of life was the Lord of all.

And that means that the core message of Christianity is not just about judgment and salvation, it is through the person Jesus Christ. And the climax of this section is verse 36 where Peter says, let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him Jesus, both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

That's where he's been going since the introduction. Remember in verse 21 he said, all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Who is that Lord? It is the name of Jesus Christ.

And God calls every single person on the planet, every one of you and me today, to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. That is the absolute ABC of salvation and the Christian faith.

[22 : 35] It is to deal with the Jesus who died and has been raised and now rules over all things. So let me move quickly then. The core message of Christianity is a word of judgment and salvation through the person of Jesus Christ.

Thirdly and finally, that demands a response from each of us. Verses 37 to the end. See verse 37, 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?

Now, you see, the sermon is a massive recognition scene. The great tragedy playing out in our world is that people are blind to who Jesus is and the stakes couldn't be any higher.

It's not just a case of mistaken identity, but you find yourself if you mistake the identity of Jesus Christ opposing God himself. Peter has told them they've crucified the Lord of glory.

They stood on the opposite side from God. No wonder they're cut to the heart. What have we done, they say? What can we do? And that's exactly the right question. That demonstrates there's conviction of the Holy Spirit.

[23 : 46] Because whenever the gospel is preached, we must respond. You do respond one way or the other. You either seek to go deeper and to receive and enter in and to worship Jesus.

Or as you hear it, you refuse him and grow indifferent and take a step toward hardening your own heart. Even after you've been a Christian for a long time, you've failed to treat Jesus as Lord, which is why we need to keep hearing this gospel, this good news.

Even as I'm preaching this morning, the sure sign of the Holy Spirit at work in your hearts is you're saying to yourself, what should I do? And Peter gives the most obvious and wonderful answer in verse 38.

He says, repent, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you'll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. You have to deal with Jesus.

That's the key. You have to acknowledge that our sin is personal for you and personal for him. And in every decision and desire this week where we've treated him as superfluous and unnecessary and expendable, Peter says, repent, change heart, change mind, change life.

[24 : 55] Recognize the horror of what you've done, not because you've been caught, but now you see he deserves the highest place. It's a change of allegiance where we put him above everyone and everything else.

And Christianity has this unique way of showing it. It's a sort of a public ceremony of humiliation called baptism where we identify with one another. We're all on the same level. We all have the same need and we all need a good wash from our sins and to be flooded by the Holy Spirit.

And then Peter says, you will receive forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the same spirit that came this day at Pentecost through the forgiveness of sins.

This is what it means to be saved. This is the core message of Christianity. It's a word of judgment and salvation through the person of Jesus to which we must respond.

And I think our response today is simply to praise God for his kindness and his grace for us. That he's provided so richly for our salvation. That he's exalted his son Jesus Christ and offered us forgiveness and his spirit.

[26 : 04] To keep deepening in your own repentance about how you and I marginalize Jesus, come back to him as the Lord of glory and commit yourself to him because you see the promises to you and to your children and to those who are far off and to engage in the work of spreading this message because part of the spirit's work in us is to give us a desire that Jesus would not just be glorified in my life but in the life of others as well.

Amen.