

Chapter 5: The Promise of the Gospel

Acts 2:37–41

We ended the last section with a cliffhanger: Peter had laid down a cosmic allegation: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). How do the people respond? As we will see through the rest of the Book of Acts, the people to whom the apostles preach regularly turn violently against those who declare the gospel of Jesus boldly (Acts 7:54; 8:3; 9:1, 23–24; 12:2–3; 13:45; 14:19; 17:5; 19:28–34; 21:27–36; 22:22; 23:12). Furthermore, these were the same crowds who had previously demanded the crucifixion of the Jesus whom Peter proclaims, and now Peter is accusing them of murder against God’s Messiah. Yet, rather than any violent, riotous response, the Israelites respond in a way that demonstrates that the Holy Spirit continues to work, by leading unbelievers to faith in Christ. In this section of the response of the crowds, we see that *the promise of the gospel cancels the condemnation of the law*.

The Condemnation of the Law (Acts 2:37)

The transitional word (ESV: “now”) from Peter’s sermon into the response of the people demonstrates that the people both listened to what Peter had preached and responded to that preaching appropriately.¹ Luke tells us that the people were “cut to the heart” (b. 37a), a rare phrase that “Homer used to depict horses stamping at the earth with their hooves.”² This term signals the deepest kind of remorse: “their entire previous attitude of unbelief was struck a deadly blow. These men felt utterly crushed. They were not only hurt but hurt so that they could not rally against the hurt. Their conscience was smitten so that they could not fend off the blow.”³ In their desperation, they cry out, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (v. 37b). They cannot simply admire Peter’s biblical exposition, and neither can they languish in the worldly grief of sorrow over their sin, which would only lead to death, as in the case of Judas (Matt. 27:3–10; 2 Cor. 7:10).⁴ Instead, they are driven to know what can be done to address the guilt they have incurred by putting Jesus to death, whom God has made both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). The law Peter that preached had crashed down

¹ “Δέ [De] is metabatic or transitional, carrying the account farther. The effect of Peter’s preaching was the one intended.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 103.)

² Polhill, *Acts*, 116.

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 104.

⁴ “But there must be added unto this pricking in heart readiness to obey. Cain and Judas were pricked in heart, but despair did keep them back from submitting themselves unto God, (Genesis 4:13; Matthew 27:3.) For the mind being oppressed with horror, can do nothing else but flee from God.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:115.)

upon his hearers as an essential first step toward leading them to seek out the gospel, for “unless the sinner is pierced in heart with this guilt, conversion will not be possible.”⁵

As we have seen, Luke has gone out of his way to demonstrate that the Book of Acts is a continuation of the story of the Gospel account of what Jesus began to do and to teach (Acts 1:1). Accordingly, Luke has so far occasionally drawn specific parallels between what happened in the Gospel of Luke, and what happened here (e.g., the parallel forty days of preparation for ministry: Luke 4:2; Acts 1:3; the parallel two men at the empty tomb and at the ascension of Jesus; Luke 24:4–7; Acts 1:10–11). Bock here points out another important parallel, when various figures asked John the Baptist what they were to do in response to his preaching the need for repentance (Luke 3:10–14). In both cases, “moved by an emotional and ethical concern, the crowd senses the need to respond to this message.”⁶ Whereas John the Baptist prepared the way for the preaching ministry of Jesus, this first sermon by Peter prepares the way for the gospel of Jesus to spread—first in Jerusalem, but ultimately to the end of the earth.

The Promise of the Gospel (Acts 2:38–39)

Peter’s response to their cry for help is “almost programmatic...with four essentials of the conversion experience”:⁷ “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” (v. 38). Before we move on to study each of these elements, we should pause to ponder what an extraordinary point it is that any solution was available at all. Did not these men deserve death for their sins? Do not we deserve death for our own sins? What hope could we possibly have for a remedy to our desperate condition? Yet, as Bruce writes, “Peter’s reply was unspeakably reassuring. Incredible as it must appear, he told them that there was hope for them even now.”⁸

First, Peter urges them to “repent” (v. 38a). The Greek word “repent” literally means a “change of mind,” and it speaks to “the conversion of the mind, that the whole man may be renewed and made another man” (Rom. 12:2), and not merely some kind of “penance” performance of “certain external rites.”⁹ Yet, as we saw in the previous passage, this repentance follows the cutting of the heart, with an expressed desire to lay hold of a solution, whatever that might be. Thus, one definition for repentance that I have often found helpful is, *a change of mind, prompting a change of heart, flowing out into a change of life*. Bruce also offers a helpful definition: “Plainly a complete change of heart, a spiritual right-about-turn.”¹⁰ The Hebrew term for repentance is also helpful (שוב; *shûb*) since it means “to turn”: i.e., to turn *from* sin, and to turn *toward* Christ in faith.

Second, Peter urges the crowd to “be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ” (v. 38b). There have been a wide range of interpretations of this phrase. On one end of the extreme, the instruction to be baptized has been interpreted by some as a requirement for salvation—i.e., as a work

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 103.

⁶ Bock, *Acts*, 141.

⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, 116.

⁸ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 75.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:116–17.

¹⁰ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 75.

we must perform if we would be saved. On the other end of the extreme, the command to be baptized has been entirely separated from salvation as to be nothing more than a symbol without any direct involvement with salvation, *per se*.

The much better view is that God uses baptism to save his people in a similar way that he uses preaching. It is not as though simply sitting under a sermon saves, and neither it is that receiving water baptism saves. Rather, like with the ongoing role of preaching in the believer's life, God uses baptism both to lead us to faith in Christ, and then to confirm, establish, and strengthen our faith in Christ over the course of our lives.¹¹ Thus, "baptism is the seal whereby [God] doth confirm unto us this benefit, and so, consequently, the earnest and pledge of our adoption, it is worthily said to be given us for the remission of sins. For because we receive Christ's gifts by faith, and baptism is a help to confirm and increase our faith, remission of sins, which is an effect of faith, is annexed unto it as unto the inferior mean."¹² Thus, baptism is like the deed to a property—not the property itself, but so connected to the property that to refuse the deed would be to refuse the property.¹³ Therefore, "every one profiteth so much in baptism as he learneth to look unto Christ."¹⁴ Importantly, this also means that the baptism of the Holy Spirit has not "superseded" water baptism, but only that water baptism is "now given a richer significance in consequence of the saving work of Christ and the descent of the Spirit."¹⁵

As a final point regarding baptism, we should not fail to notice that Peter says that we must be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ." This cannot mean that the pastor should only use the name of Jesus Christ in baptism, since Jesus himself commanded us to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). Rather, Peter is acknowledging here what he had just finished preaching about in the preceding sermon: namely, that King Jesus is seated on the throne of David in the heavenly Jerusalem by his resurrection and ascension, and that he is reigning and ruling through his Holy Spirit who is at work on earth.¹⁶ We are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ in the sense that we are baptized upon his authority.

Third, Peter says that this conversion is "for the forgiveness of your sins" (v. 38c). The word that we translate as "forgiveness" suggests something stronger than a mere plea deal where the Lord agrees not to prosecute us. Rather, the Scriptures tell us that God has removed our sins "as far as the east is from the west," or into "the depths of the sea," as Lenski reminds us: "The idea to be conveyed is that the sins are removed from the sinner so as never to be found again, never again to be brought

¹¹ While baptism is to be administered only once, we are called to "improve" (i.e., to *make use of*) our baptisms over the course of our lives (see *Westminster Larger Catechism* #167). By contrast, we are to receive preaching and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper multiple times throughout our lives.

¹² Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:119.

¹³ "A refusal of baptism would be a repudiation of Christ and of all the gifts contained in his name. He who wants a piece of property wants and accepts the deed to it: if he will not have the deed he may be quite certain he does not really care for the property, especially since both property and deed are a gift." (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 106.)

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:120.

¹⁵ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 76.

¹⁶ "That baptism takes place in the name of Jesus Christ shows the authority Jesus has at God's side in heaven." (Bock, *Acts*, 143.)

to confront him. God sends them away, and he would thus be the last to bring them back. When the sinner appears before his judgment seat, his sins are gone forever....Nor does the guilt remain, for sin and guilt are one: sin gone, guilt gone!”¹⁷ What a blessing and comfort for those who trust in Christ for their salvation!

Fourth, Peter promises, “and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (v. 38d). In this, we “must distinguish the *gift* of the Spirit from the *gifts* of the Spirit. The *gift* of the Spirit is the Spirit Himself, bestowed by the Father through the Messiah; the *gifts* of the Spirit are those spiritual faculties which the Spirit imparts, ‘dividing to each one severally even as he will’ (I Cor. 12:11).”¹⁸ Further, we must also distinguish the temporary, miraculous demonstrations of the Spirit’s presence that we read about here (speaking in tongues, prophesying) from the permanent possession of the Spirit that leads us to faith in Christ: “For because Christ meant to set forth the beginning of his kingdom with those miracles, they lasted but for a time...yet is it given us for a better use, that we may believe with the heart unto righteousness, that our tongues may be framed unto true confession, (Romans 10:10,) that we may pass from death to life, (John 5:24) that we, which are poor and empty, may be made rich, that we may withstand Satan and the world stoutly.”¹⁹ This point is important especially in contrast with the Old Testament, when the Spirit’s presence did not necessarily guarantee salvation (e.g., in the case of Saul).²⁰ Even on the great day of Pentecost, it is worth noting that “We do not read that any of the 3,000 spoke with tongues, yet they all received the Holy Spirit.”²¹

In v. 39, Peter then declares the scope of those who may receive the promises of forgiveness of sins and 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.” Most importantly, Peter declares that the promise is for his hearers: “For the promise is for you” (v. 39a). Again, Peter’s response arose as an answer to a question: “Brothers, what shall we do?” (v. 37). Here is the answer—and it provides a solution “for you”!

Notably, Peter also says that this answer is not only “for you,” but also “for your children” (v. 39b). Within a Jewish context, where the covenant promises were not only made for believing parents, but also for their children, this phrase teaches that the children of believers have a special claim to the promises of the gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 7:14). No, this does not mean that salvation is guaranteed for the children of believers, and yes, God can and will bring in new believers from “far off,” as Peter declares next. Nevertheless, this language echoes what God said to Abraham in the establishment of circumcision: “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and

¹⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 108.

¹⁸ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 77.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:121.

²⁰ “In other words, the Spirit is not simply given to equip believers for service but to make possible the sort of transformed relationship with God promised in passages such as Isaiah 32:15–17; 44:2–5; Ezekiel 11:19–20; 36:26–27 (cf. Je. 31:31–34). The Spirit is given to minister the benefits of Jesus’ saving work to believers, individually and corporately, and to make possible the conversion of others. We see the practical effect of all this in the life of the early church, as illustrated in 2:42–47.” (Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 156.)

²¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 109.

to your offspring after you” (Gen. 17:7). The covenant was not with “you” alone (whether with Abraham or with the Jews on the Day of Pentecost); the covenant (and the *promise* of the covenant) are with you *and your children*. For this reason, we believe that the church “consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; *and of their children*.”²² Moreover, it is on this basis that we baptize the children of professing believers, even as the Lord commanded Abraham to circumcise his offspring after him.²³

Finally, Peter makes very clear that the promise is not limited to these Jews and their offspring. Rather, the promise is also “for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (v. 39c). If Genesis 17 is still in view, this may echo the inclusion of the slaves bought from “any foreigner who is not of your offspring” whom Abraham was to circumcise, along with his offspring (Gen. 17:12–13). More specifically, the language of this phrase seems to combine the promises of two Old Testament passages: Isaiah 57:19 (“Peace, *peace to the far* and to the near,’ says the LORD”) and Joel 2:32, picking up immediately after the end of what Peter had quoted in Acts 2:21 (“And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be *those whom the LORD calls*”).²⁴ Peterson argues that this promise of the extension of the gospel to those who are “far off” might have Gentiles in view; “however, given Luke’s ‘geographical approach to history writing and the telling of the story of the early church’, the most probable reference in this early context is to ‘Jews in distant lands.’”²⁵ This is careful exegesis, and Peterson is making an important point within the context of the book. I would suggest, however, that it may be more accurate to say that what Peter says here gains a fuller significance that would not have been apparent to the original audience, even if it ultimately extends fully as a promise to all the Gentiles, “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The Wilderness Warning (Acts 2:40–41)

Although Peter has concluded his presentation of the “programmatic” elements of gospel conversion (repentance, baptism, forgiveness of sins, and the promise of the Holy Spirit), as well as the identification of the recipients of those promises, the next verse is more important than it may appear at first glance: “And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this crooked generation’” (v. 40). This is not merely a summary, but it offers us an important connection to what Peter wants us to see as an Old Testament typological shadow that anticipated this scene.

To appreciate the connection, Bock draws our attention to the phrase “crooked generation,” noting that these same words (although in slightly different forms) appear in two places in the Greek

²² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 25.2.

²³ “Therefore, even as God made his covenant with Isaac, being as yet unborn, because he was the seed of Abraham, so Peter teacheth, that all the children of the Jews are contained in the same covenant, because this promise is always in force, I will be the God of your seed.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:123.)

²⁴ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 78.

²⁵ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 156.

translation of the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 32:5 and Psalm 78:8, both of which “are allusions to the generation that wandered in the wilderness.”²⁶ This is a fascinating observation, since we should remember that the reason that generation had to wander in the wilderness was that they refused to enter the promised land after they feared from the report of the ten unfaithful spies (Num. 13–14). After the people express their desire to turn back to Egypt, the Lord expresses exasperation with his people, saying to Moses, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?” (Num. 14:11). It is interesting, then, that when Jesus seems to allude to that verse when he laments his “generation.” First, in Luke 9:41, he echoes the “how long” language of Numbers 14:11: “O faithless and twisted generation, *how long* am I to be with you and bear with you?” Then, in Luke 11:29, he echoes the “sign” language: “This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a *sign*, but no *sign* will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.”

Then connection between the present passage and the apostasy of Israel that led to their wilderness wanders is compelling: the Lord had brought his people to the brink of the fulfillment of his promises: in the Old Testament, to the border of the land of Canaan; in the New Testament, to the person of Jesus Christ.²⁷ Yet, in both cases, many of the people turn away from that fulfillment. In the Old Testament, that wilderness generation was cut off from (i.e., disinherited from) the *promise* of the inheritance, so that their bodies “fell dead in the wilderness”—a fate that the author of Hebrews also alludes to in order to warn those Jews of his own day who are tempted to apostatize from Jesus (Heb. 3:17). Indeed, what happened with the land of Canaan as a shadow is now brought to its fullest reality in the “promise” of the inheritance held out in Jesus Christ, in whom all God’s promises find their “yes” (2 Cor. 1:20). As bad as it was for the Israelites to apostatize from the typological shadow, far worse it would be to apostatize from the fulfillment and reality of that Old Testament type in the person of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. The warning is clear: just as the Israelites who did not believe in the Lord after all his signs to bring them out of Egypt were cut off from Israel, so also those Israelites who do not believe in Jesus after all his “mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22) will be cut off from Israel. Thus, Peter urges these Israelites to save themselves from the crooked generation of their people in order to be saved from being cut off from that people.²⁸

The conclusion to this passage is similarly important: “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls” (v. 41). As Bruce notes, these three thousand souls represented “a much larger company won in a single day than Jesus had secured to His allegiance in two or three years of public ministry. No wonder that He told His disciples that, as a result of His returning to His Father, they would perform greater works than they had ever seen

²⁶ Bock, *Acts*, 146. Citing W. J. Larkin, Jr., *Acts*, IVP New Testament Commentary 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 60, and I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 82.

²⁷ Bruce makes this connection strongly: “The new believing community was, in fact, the faithful remnant of the Old Israel and at the same time the nucleus of the new Israel, the Christian church.” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 79.)

²⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, 118.

Him do (John 14:12).”²⁹ King Jesus is establishing the reign of his kingdom through the power of his Holy Spirit.

Discussion Questions

1. How do we know that the people have made a change of mind in v. 37? Where do we see their change of heart? How do we see their desire to change their lives? How does this glimpse of the response of the Israelites at Pentecost fill out our understanding of the nature of repentance unto life? Have you repented from your sin and rebellion against the Lord to the degree that Luke portrays from the people in this scene?
2. How does the word “repent” signal not only a turning away from sin, but also a turning toward Christ by faith (v. 38a)? In what sense does Peter call the people to baptism as a part of the response that the Lord requires of them (v. 38b)? What does the idea of God’s “forgiveness” of our sins convey (v. 38c)? What is the “gift of the Holy Spirit (v. 38d)? What do the recipients of the promises in v. 39 tell us about the membership and mission of the church?
3. What Old Testament story does the language of “crooked generation” invoke (v. 40; see Deut. 32:5; Ps. 78:8)? Why was the unbelief of that generation so heinous to God (Num. 14:11)? How does Israel’s apostasy from the promised land in the Old Testament foreshadow Israel’s apostasy from the promised Messiah in the New Testament? Why did a remnant enter the promised land in the Old Testament? How do we see a remnant enter into the promises of the gospel here?
4. Have you responded to the promises of the gospel by faith in your own life? If not, what is keeping you from doing so? Have you truly considered the condemnation of God’s perfect law against you, along with the eternal consequences that such condemnation could bring? If you do profess faith in Christ, how do you see your life bearing fruit in keeping with repentance (Matt. 3:8)? Where do you need to press forward in repentance and faith today?

²⁹ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 79.