

February 2, 2020

PROVIDENCE, PREACHING, AND THE POWER OF GOD

Acts 1:15-2:47

*(2 of 17 in a series through Acts)*

The early chapters of the book of Acts are captivating, and my guess is that most of us find ourselves attracted to them. You have the day of Pentecost, with the sound of rushing wind, fire, and men speaking in other languages. You have the powerful preaching of Peter and the conversion of about 3,000 people so that the church in one day grows from 120 to 3,120 people. And then you have the life of the church together—learning, fellowshiping, sharing, evangelizing, and seeing people added to them daily. Any one of these elements is captivating enough for us to settle down and spend a lot of time looking into them, reflecting on them in microscopic detail. And when I first started pastoring I did just that. In my quest to preach through the entire canon of Scripture, the book of Acts was the first book I went through. I preached it in forty-five messages, hoping that a slow trek through this book would give us a picture of what the Lord intended for the church to be.

But in some ways, looking so closely at the details—with all its benefits—limited us from seeing some of the very elements I'd hoped we'd see. In other words, if you decide to focus on each twig of each branch of each tree in the forest—again, as beneficial as it can be—at the end of your examination you might not be able to tell someone much about the layout of the forest. And so I decided that the next time I came back to the book of Acts to preach through it (as we're doing now, twenty years later), that I would approach it from a bit of a higher altitude, ensuring that we don't miss the forest for the trees, or more specifically don't miss the elements that made up the early church's foundation, work, and mission. And I hope that we'll see the fruits of that this morning because I think by looking at 1:15-2:47 as a unit, we get to see a foundation for the work of the early church, the global reach of their mission, the nature of their preaching, and a glimpse into their day-to-day interactions. Moreover, my hope this morning is what it was twenty years ago when I first worked through this book—I want us to learn, and grow, and find ourselves transformed as we take a look at these earliest days of the early church.

Before unveiling some sermon points, however, let me just walk us briefly through the events that unfold in 1:15-2:47. In 1:15-26 we have a glimpse into one of those days that spanned the time after the ascension of Jesus and before the day of Pentecost. During that time Peter stood up and said to the 120 persons with him that they needed to replace Judas among the twelve. Judas, after his betrayal of Jesus, had taken his own life, and so the remaining apostles narrowed the choice down to two men—who had to have walked with Jesus during his entire ministry and had witnessed the resurrection—and they cast lots to see the Lord's direction, which landed on Matthias.

Chapter 2 begins with the fulfillment of what Jesus had spoken of in 1:4-5—the coming and baptism of the Holy Spirit. As the 120 followers of Christ are gathered together in one place, on the day of Pentecost, a mighty rushing wind came, tongues of fire rested on them, and they

began proclaiming the mighty works of God in the differing languages of the people gathered together in Jerusalem on that day. Then, in 2:14-41 we see Peter standing up and preaching a sermon in which he interprets the events that just happened in light of Joel 2, speaks of the redeeming work of Christ, and calls for individuals to repent and be baptized, which 3,000 people do. And, finally, in the last verses (2:42-47), we see the life of these believers together, devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowshiping together, sharing communion and other meals together, and in prayer, as the Lord worked mightily through the apostles and added to the church daily individuals who were being saved.

What key themes do we then see in this glimpse into the life of the early church? Let me name four this morning, beginning with the sovereign work of God.

### **The sovereign work of God**

One of the things that is revealed quite quickly as the early church begins their work is how clearly they operate with an understanding that the Lord is sovereign, that is, that the Lord is absolutely in control, carrying out his plans and purposes in this world as he desires. Let me show you this in the text first, and then think together about how beneficial this is for them (and for us!).

First, we see it with the appointment of Matthias to replace Judas among the twelve. Look at Peter's first words as he stands and addresses the group. He says, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoken beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus" (1:16). Now, let me explain briefly how I think Peter is seeing this Scripture that he's just generally referenced (and will specifically quote in v. 20) works. He quotes from Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8, and each of these psalms are written by David, speaking of men who unjustly accuse and persecute him. Therefore, David speaks of these men dying so that another comes along and occupies the office their death has caused to be vacated. And what Peter understands is that David is a "type" or picture of Jesus in the OT. So the Lord, for example, will say in Ezekiel 34 that he will send his servant David to come and gather his sheep as their shepherd, and Jesus can show up and say that he is the good shepherd because he knows that the shepherd David served as a picture or pointer which Jesus is the fulfillment of. Consequently, when David feels betrayed by the Lord and writes in Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus can take those same words on his own lips from the cross because he's fulfilling in a greater way what David—in his life and experience—was pointing toward. So it is here. As David spoke of his enemies dying and another coming along to occupy the vacated office of the deceased man, so Peter rightly sees that this needs to happen in an even greater way with regard to Jesus, to whom David's life pointed. I think that's how he's understanding Psalm 69 and 109. Thus, he rightly sees Judas's death and replacement as necessary, being prophesied in and through the events of David's life.

But the main thing I want us to see is that Peter sees this as something that "*had* to be fulfilled" and something that the "Holy Spirit spoke *beforehand*." In other words, Peter understands that if God spoke something hundreds of year earlier that would happen, then it *had* to happen. God

is in control, and he will always do what he says. And sure enough, it happened, as they appointed Matthias to replace the office vacated by Judas's death.

But this isn't an exceptional moment with these early believers. How does Peter interpret the Spirit being poured out on the day of Pentecost? He says that it is a fulfillment of the prophecy that came through the mouth of Joel as he said, "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh" (2:17). Again, God spoke for hundreds of years that his people—young and old, male and female, slave and free—would have the Spirit of God, and Peter is saying that God is sovereignly fulfilling what he said he was going to do.

Then, as Peter speaks of Christ's death, he doesn't speak as if it were something that just so happened to take place. Rather, he says, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (2:23). Christ's death was no accident of history but a fulfillment of the plan of God that the Lord brought about as the sovereign ruler of the world. Then, we see the same thing with regard to Christ's resurrection, which Peter interprets as a fulfillment of the prophecy of David from Psalm 16, which he had made hundreds of years earlier. Specifically Peter says of David, "Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption" (2:29-30). In other words, the resurrection happened and could be spoken of hundreds of years prior as if it were certainly going to happen because God swore it would happen, and God is sovereign, absolutely in control of this world.

Now I cannot overstate how important this reality is for the early church. I mean think about what Jesus—who was just turned over by his own people and crucified by the Romans—tells to do. He tells them to go into the whole world and preach to people who will persecute them, telling them that Jesus is the crucified and risen King, and he'll gather his people to himself. Who signs up for that? What hope of success do you have with that? The odds of this small group of people in Jerusalem turning the world upside down is ridiculous. The idea that their witness would spread so mightily that people in Jackson, TN would gather to worship the crucified and risen Lord Jesus is preposterous. But they knew that their God was the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth and would fulfill his purposes and plans.

With that information, then, how can you not be confident? If God is in control of the world, has told us he'll gather people from every nation through his people preaching the gospel, then the odds are one hundred percent certain, aren't they? That scene of people from every nation on earth worshiping before the throne will certainly be a reality. And bringing it into the present with us, this is why we're willing to do crazy things like convince a group of people to move to Salt Lake City, where ninety-eight percent of the population doesn't know Jesus, and we're telling our people to go there and plant churches. What are the chances that's going to succeed? Well, we're putting our hopes in the hands of a sovereign God who has told us to go and make disciples of Jesus all over the world, and so we go, well aware of our weakness and well aware that he is the sovereign Lord. That's the first theme we see. Second, we see the global aim of the gospel.

## The global aim of the gospel

I think this can be the most easily missed but crucially important theme in Acts 2. And the reason why is because we easily get caught up in the sights and sounds while missing what is most important. Let me explain what I mean. As the Spirit is poured out on these believers in Acts 2:1-4, it's a phenomenal scene. There is a sound like a mighty rushing wind that fills the room, tongues as a fire come and rest on each of them, and then they began to speak in other tongues (i.e. languages) as the Spirit enables them. And I think sometimes we so easily get captivated by these phenomena that we miss the most important reality that is communicated.

So, let me take a shallow dive into these realities and then show you what I think is most important. The wind and the fire represent, so it seems, the presence and power of God. In the OT the Lord would make his presence known in a pillar of fire, and Jesus compares the Spirit to wind. And the speaking in other languages is indeed another amazing phenomenon that I don't think is exactly like the gift of the Spirit that we see in 1 Corinthians 12-14, for with that gift, no one understands it, and it needs supernatural interpretation. Whereas with this manifestation of speaking in tongues, each person hears the apostles declaring God's mighty works in his own language. There's no interpreter needed. But it's actually here that the real point is being made.

If you were to go back to Genesis 10-11 something amazing happens. In Genesis 10 you have a listing of the descendants of Ham, Shem, and Japheth (the sons of Noah). This is referred to as the "Table of Nations" because we see the source and development of all the nations on earth from these three. Then, Genesis 11 begins with these words: "Now the whole earth had one language and the same words." But we might remember what happened. The people decide to gather in one place, build the tower of Babel, and make a great name for themselves, so the Lord, in judgment, confuses their language so that they began speaking different languages and scatters them over the face of the earth.

Now, with that in mind, think of what's happening in Acts 2. The Spirit comes, the believers begin speaking in other languages, and then Luke tells us in 2:5-6, "Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language." Then Luke names the different peoples who were hearing them speak in their native language, and as he lists the groups he mentions peoples who were descendants of Ham, Shem, and Japheth.

Do you see then what is happening? The Lord is showing a precise reversal of Genesis 10-11. Just as Genesis 11 showed the judgment of God with confusion and scattering, so Luke is showing us that the mission of the church will be to bring the message of salvation to all nations, gathering Christ's people to himself. And right out of the gate the Spirit makes clear that Christ's people will be a global people. He's not gathering people just from this segment or that one, just from those who speak this one language or that one. He's gathering people from every part of this planet, whatever language they might speak. That is, the aim of the gospel is global.

This is why Casey and Giuly Kidd, for example, have been learning a language they don't know and living with a tribe of people in the jungles of Peru. It's because they understand that the gospel demands this sort of labor because the Lord has shown us that he will have people even among the jungles of Peru. And it's why we will continue to train up people and send them out to keep doing such work *globally*. We see right from the start the global aim of the gospel. Third, we see the apostolic preaching of Christ.

### **The apostolic preaching of Christ**

As Peter stands to preach in 2:14, he first explains what is going on by telling the people that this pouring out of the Spirit is simply a fulfillment of what God has spoken of through the prophet Joel years prior. But right after that explanation, he begins to preach, saying, "Men of Israel, hear these words" (2:22). So what is the content of his sermon? What did the apostles preach? They preached Christ crucified and raised.

Notice Peter's sermon. He declares, "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. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it" (2:22-24). Then he shows that this was God's plan by pointing to Psalm 16 where David spoke of the Lord not letting him see corruption, and Peter shows that this is fulfilled in Jesus along the same lines that we saw earlier. David may have avoided being killed by his enemies as he wrote Psalm 16 but his life pointed to Jesus whom God literally didn't allow to see corruption. Jesus' body was only in the tomb from Friday night to Sunday morning, and then God raised him from the dead before his body started decaying.

That's not true of David, as Peter notes, pointing out that David's body has been decaying in his tomb for years. Nor is it true of David that he ascended into heaven, but David wrote about God speaking to his Messiah, telling him to reign at his right hand until his enemies were all put in submission. So, Peter is showing them that Jesus is God's promised king.

Then, he calls for a response. After the people are pierced, realizing that they crucified the Messiah, Peter tells them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins and receiving of the Holy Spirit. With repentance, we turn from our self-reliance, and baptism is an act whereby we publicly profess our faith in the crucified and risen Lord. And as we believe, we receive forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit comes to indwell us. And 3,000 people were saved that day.

Brothers and sisters, that is the gospel we preach. That's how we bear witness to Jesus. We preach of his death for sinners and resurrection to reign. We tell people to repent, believe, and be baptized. And we tell them that if they do they will be forgiven of their sins and receive the Holy Spirit. That's how the apostles preached Christ, and it's how every generation of believers since have needed to preach Christ. And if we are saved it's because someone proclaimed that

to us. Therefore, let us be faithful to keep preaching that message to our co-workers, neighbors, and all people everywhere.

Finally, we see the beautiful life of the early church

### **The beautiful life of the early church**

In 2:42-47 we see a glimpse of the life of the early church. It's a glorious picture. The apostles are teaching these 3,000 plus people. They're fellowshiping together, taking the Lord's Supper, eating together, praying together. The Lord is working amazing miracles through the hands of the apostles. They sold their possessions and gave to one another as each had need. They gathered in the temple but also gathered together daily. And they kept preaching the gospel so that daily the Lord was adding believers to the church.

Now one of the questions that perhaps rises up in our hearts is, "Should we look exactly like that picture of the early church?" And I think we can say no and yes. No, in the sense that it is not required that we imitate every action we see in these verses. Eventually, as we work through the book of Acts we see that the church begins to gather together and celebrate the Lord's Supper on Sundays (i.e. the Lord's day; see Acts 20:7), not gathering every day as they're doing here. And though they share all things in common, we do see that they recognized private property, as Peter will acknowledge to Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 that they have the right to own property and do with it what they want. So maybe we can say that some of these things were exceptional in these early days.

But, at the same time, there is much here that I think we should attempt to imitate. We do gather each week on the Lord's Day, come to the table together, and devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching as it is preserved for us in the Scripture. It's a commitment each of us has (or should have) as members of this church. We gather on Sundays—the day Jesus rose from the dead—to gather with the saints, hear his Word, and sing God's praises because there's nothing more important in our lives than the Lord, right? Our lives revolve around this reality. And we should (and do) fellowship together throughout the week, encouraging one another and even sharing meals together. We should (and do) share generously with one another, caring for one another's needs, and in the work of the church's mission we should be regular and generous givers of our finances because—again—we demonstrate that there is nothing more central to our hearts than seeing Christ obeyed. And we keep speaking of the work of Christ to those we encounter so that they might be added to the church. So, in many ways, we must make sure that our lives reflect the clear commitment that is reflected in this glimpse into the day-to-day life of the early church. In fact, it might be good to take some time as ask if you and I—individually—are contributing to ensuring many of these elements are present among us.

Thus, in these early chapters, we see a belief in the sovereign work of God, the global aim of the gospel, the apostolic preaching of Christ, and the beautiful life of the early church. May we as a church commit afresh to making sure these are pillars for us as well, and may we reflect that as we come to the table. Amen.