

The First Sermon

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[0 : 00] We continue our series on the book of Acts this morning, and we've just read the first Christian sermon, the first sermon ever in history.

We read the whole thing, it's very long, and it's about the gospel, it's about the good news of Jesus Christ, and there's so much in it, it's the thing I always say, there's so much here, and we can't talk about all of it.

So for instance, we can't spend time this morning talking about the very end, the notion of baptism and the promise, but verse 36 and 37 at the end of the passage offers a sort of compendium, a sketch in just these two verses that epitomizes the whole of the passage.

In verse 36, Peter says, let all of you be assured, let the house of Israel know, may you be certain, there's a few ways to say it, that God made Jesus Christ Lord, and you see when he says, let all of you know, let all of you be certain, he's appealing to the mind, he's appealing to the intellect, he's saying I've made a case for Jesus, so all of you need to know, you need to have your minds changed.

And then in verse 37, it says when he told them this, that they were cut to the heart, you see, so as soon as he presented what they needed to know, the intellectual case, it says that this cut them to the heart.

[1 : 27] In other words, sermons, and here we go, here's your evaluation stick for today, sermons ought to appeal to both the mind and the heart, because that's exactly what Peter does here in this first sermon.

And that's because the gospel appeals to the mind and the heart. The gospel answers problems of the mind, intellectual problems, and problems of the heart. So we'll start with the mind.

So he says in verse 36, be certain, all of you should know, that God has made Jesus Lord. Now what's he doing here? What's he saying? He's persuading.

He's trying to say that I'm trying to persuade you to believe. He knows his audience, and he's trying to persuade his audience. Now this is just after the Feast of Pentecost, and at the beginning of the passage, you'll remember that they suppose that all these people who have come out at Pentecost speaking in other languages at the coming of the Holy Spirit are drunk, right?

They say these guys are drunk. This is crazy. And Peter comes and says, and they're not drunk, let me explain to you. And how does he explain it to them? Did you catch it? What's the primary way that he explains the gospel to them?

[2 : 37] He goes to the Old Testament. So he begins with Joel in verse 17 in our passage. He says that, look, Joel prophesied this, I will pour out my spirit on all flesh.

This has been long foretold. And then he turns to David in the Psalms, Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 in verse 25 and 34, where David has visions of a Lord sitting at the right hand of his Lord.

And the issue there is, if David is king, then who in the world is it? Who is this Lord that's sitting at the right hand of Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament? Who is it? And what Peter is saying is that, look, Jesus Christ, this Lord, has long been prophesied.

He's long been foretold in ages past. David is dead, but he knew of one to come, great David's greater son. He knew of something that was to come.

This has been long foretold. In other words, Jesus Christ makes sense of the Old Testament. That's what he's saying to them. In other words, he's coming into their own belief system.

[3 : 42] They already believed the Old Testament. They believed the promises of Abraham, of David, of Moses. And he's saying, look, if you believe this, if you believe this, if you believe this, then you should see this.

It makes sense. You see, he's giving them a case. He's persuading them. And he's coming into their own belief system. He does not say, look, Christianity versus Judaism, you're wrong. No, you're wrong. It's this for that, this verse that, no, he doesn't do that. He says, let me show you how Jesus makes sense of the things you already believe.

You see, in other words, he finds common ground with them in order to help them understand the gospel. This the Bible calls an apologetic.

This is called an apologetic. What's an apologetic? And in 1 Peter 3:16, Peter, the author of that epistle, who's the one preaching here, says he calls on his readers, always be prepared to give, and here's the little Greek word, an apologia for the hope that is within you.

[4 : 47] Now, apologia, an apologetic, an apologetic doesn't mean to say you're sorry. It means to love, to be prepared to lovingly persuade.

Every time you proclaim the gospel, he's saying you must be prepared to lovingly persuade others about the gospel. In other words, he's suggesting this, that if you want to teach and preach, if you want to be a Christian that goes out and ministers, you have to understand that the gospel speaks to the mind.

And you have to be prepared to speak to the mind. The gospel deals with intellectual problems. Always be prepared to give an apologia for the hope that is within you. You have to be able to appeal to the mind.

There are things that have to be known and have to be defended, and that's what the Bible calls an apologetic. The gospel proclamation doesn't forego the mind, and that's central to Peter's sermon here.

You saw it, well, let me say this. Oftentimes we think of repentance, which he calls us to do in verse 37, repent as something that's totally an issue of the heart.

[5 : 54] But literally the word repentance, if you translate it absolutely literally, it's the little Greek verb metanaeo, it means literally change your mind. It literally means change your mind.

Think something differently. In other words, what he's doing is he's saying, I've presented historical claims before you. I've presented evidence. I've tried to show you that this is a solid case.

Jesus Christ makes sense of all of history for you. I've tried to show you that. And now you're faced with this historical decision that you have to make. To change your mind or not. That's what it means for repent.

To change your mind. To think that this is true. See? And so, did you notice he appeals three times to testimony, to witnesses.

In verse 22 he says, look, you saw this guy, Jesus performed miracles. Many of you were there for this. You saw him do stuff that other people cannot do. You saw it.

[6 : 49] And then in verse 32 he says, and not only that, but we have seen him resurrected. You saw this man die on a cross, but I'm telling you right here, I and along with these others, we saw this guy walk out of the grave.

We saw him walk for 40 days after he resurrected from the dead. And Paul would go on in 1 Corinthians 15 to say, more than 500 people saw this man after he had resurrected from the dead. You see the case he's making? Seven hundred years ago, David prophesied about this man. Don't you see? He fits the bill. You saw him perform miracles.

I saw him walk out of the grave. I saw him walk after he came out of the grave. He's building a case. He's saying, change your mind. Don't you see? This makes sense. It works.

Look, what he's saying is that what he's suggesting is that the burden of proof is not simply on Christians to prove that the resurrection happened.

[7 : 48] No. But he's saying that every single human being has to come up against these historical claims that have been made and decide what they're going to do with them.

Larry Hurtado, who is a retired New Testament professor at New College, Edinburgh, across the street, just published a book this past year called Destroyer of the Gods.

And he kind of continues a thesis that a lot of other New Testament scholars and his church historians have been talking about the last decade. And they're asking the question, why in the world did Christianity, why was it so successful?

So there's never been a movement in history or religion or a philosophy that has ever done what Christianity did. You realize that in 50 to 75 years, Christianity had literally turned the entire Mediterranean world upside down.

To become a Christian gave you no cultural advantages whatsoever. It guaranteed persecution in the first century. No cultural advantages. Yet thousands upon thousands upon thousands were converting to it all of a sudden in the first century all around the Roman Empire.

[8 : 56] And what Hurtado, one of the things Hurtado is saying in his book is asking the question, why? What in the world was it about Christianity that turned the Mediterranean upside down that caused a revolution that changed the world forever?

And he appeals to one thing particularly, and that's that nobody had ever claimed to be witnesses of the resurrection of the Godman.

It was because 500 and more people saw it and claimed to go around and actually say, look, look, if you don't believe me, ask that guy. If you don't believe me, ask this guy. I saw it.

You see, it was eyewitness testimony, he's suggesting, that turned the entire Mediterranean upside down that changed the whole course of history. Nothing ever has happened like that in all of history with any religion, with any philosophy, with any worldview, nothing.

Tim Keller heard him say once that when people come to him and they say, you know, they're struggling with the claims of Christianity, with the claims of the Bible, the claims of Jesus.

[10 : 05] And they say, you know, look, I want to believe, I want to have faith, I want to have religion. But I don't know what to do with God and evil.

I don't know what to do with the way some of the Old Testament seems to me to contradict the New Testament. I don't know what to do with all these problems that I keep coming up against. He says that he simply says one thing to them, and that's exactly what's at the center of Peter's sermon. And it's this, Christianity above all is the profession of the resurrection of the Son of God. And all you have to do first, if you're struggling with the claims of Christianity, is come up against the claims of the resurrection.

That's what you have to deal with. That's what Christianity is. It's the profession of the resurrected God-man. If Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, that means that you have to believe everything that the Bible says.

And if Jesus Christ wasn't raised from the dead, it means you don't have to believe any of it. So you don't have to worry about any of the other problems until you've come to wrestle with the claim that the Son of God was risen from the dead.

[11 : 14] That's the first thing that has to be dealt with before anything else. So what Peter's doing here for us is he's saying gospel proclamation, preaching, evangelism, talking to people about the testimony of Jesus Christ.

It involves appealing to the mind. It involves calling on people to change their mind, to believe something that happened. It's calling us to intellectual problems, to understanding that Jesus Christ died and resurrected in history.

Okay, so that's the first thing. Peter appeals to the mind. And then secondly, he doesn't only appeal to the mind, but he also appeals to the heart. It says in verse 37 that these intellectual claims cut to the heart.

They didn't stay in the head, they cut to the heart. So he's saying that the gospel changes your mind and it changes your heart. And there's particularly two things in this passage that the gospel addresses, two heart problems that the gospel addresses.

And the first is the moral problem. It's the problem of human wrongdoing and guilt. And then the second, Peter calls the pangs of death, the problem of death.

[12 : 34] See, these are the two great problems that every single human being comes up against in life. The problem that they do wrong stuff, in Christianity we call it sin.

And the problem that on the horizon of the future, death is inevitable. And it doesn't matter what you believe, doesn't matter where you come from, what religion or faith or anything, these are the two great problems of all of human reality.

The problem that we know that we're not perfect, that we know we're guilty, and the problem that death confronts us all, inevitably.

Every single religion, every single philosophy, every single worldview in all of history has always agreed with this. So even in modernity, some of the most materialistic or atheistic claims that human wrongdoing and guilt are simply moral constructs that we've created to go about polite society, even then, even saying that you're recognizing the reality that we still feel guilty.

You still have to explain the fact that we all still feel guilty. Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist who wrote his most famous for the book War and Peace.

[13:48] He wrote in 1884 at the end of his life a book called The Confessions. If you know Church history at all, you'll know that it was modeled after Augustine's Confessions.

It's an end of the life confession, all the things that I've thought my whole life that nobody knew about, kind of a thing. And this is how he puts the issue. My question, that which at the age of 50 brought me to the verge of suicide, was the simplest of questions.

Starting in the soul of every single human, from the fullest child to the wisest elder, it was a question without an answer to which one cannot live.

It was this, what will come of what I'm doing today or what I shall do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life?

Or the question could be put this way, is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?

[14:47] That's the question. Is there any meaning in this life, anything that we do today or tomorrow that the inevitability of death does not destroy? It's the question that faces every human.

The ancient answer was one of two things. One, that there's hope after death of an eternal disembodied bliss with the gods, right, where your soul goes up and lives with the gods forever.

The other answer that was offered was cycles of reincarnation, so that sure you're going to die, but you're going to come back again in a different embodied state in the new life. Those are the two ancient answers.

But the problem with both of those is that neither of them offers any real solution to death because death still takes away your identity. You will never again be who you are.

And it takes away your body, something essential to who you are. You're an embodied consciousness, embodied person, right? Neither of those ever really satisfied. And the only thing that modernity has offered that's new and fresh is to come to terms with perhaps the inevitable that death is simply the end, that there is no solution, and that all we have to do is cope.

[16:03] But look, just like the ancient solutions, that's not really satisfied anybody, but Richard Dawkins, he's about the only one left, I think that's still satisfied by that answer. It doesn't satisfy anybody.

In this sermon, Peter is offering Christianity as an alternative. And this is how he does it. In verse 36, at the end of verse 36, he addresses both of these problems by saying something rather puzzling.

He says, you crucified him, Jesus Christ. You crucified Jesus Christ, he says. Now this, you can't see it in English, but in Greek, this word you is plural.

So it literally says something more like, all of you crucified Jesus Christ. And you'll know that you'll immediately recognize the problem. The problem is that this is Pentecost.

And there are hundreds and thousands of people from all over the Mediterranean that were not there for the life of Jesus. They never saw him embodied. They never, hundreds of them had nothing to do with his death, literally.

[17:12] They did not physically nail the nails into his arms. They were not there saying, crucify him, crucify him at the trial. They weren't there for it. Right?

What is he saying? He's not literally saying, all of you out there, you thousands, you nailed the nails into his hands. He's saying, you might not have hit the hammer that put the nail through his hand, but you nailed him to the cross.

You did. All of you. You see, what he's suggesting is that the moral problem, the problem of human guilt is this, that every single human being in all of history, because of their guilt, nailed him to the cross.

That humanity nailed him to the cross. And at that very moment, he's saying, here's the problem with your sin. It killed the God man, and here is the solution to your sin.

It killed the God man. You see, it's simultaneously the answer to the problem, and it gives the solution. Now, one of the questions that comes up with this, we call this the atonement.

[18:22] And one of the questions that comes up for us today, that wasn't a question that was asked so much in the first century, was this, if God is all powerful, why does he know?

Why does he not just forgive us? If Christianity says every single human being has a guilt problem, then why does God, if he's all powerful, not just pardon us, not just forgive us, is he really all

powerful if he can't simply forgive us?

But if you reflect on it, and you're honest with yourself for just a moment, you'll know that forgiveness always costs something, and in your own life, that every single time you've ever tried to forgive, it has cost you something.

Forgiveness never comes free. There's no such thing as simply forgiving. It's always costly to forgive. If somebody does something wrong against you, and you choose to forgive them, the cost that they've accrued doesn't simply go away.

Where does it go? You absorb it. When you choose to forgive somebody that's wronged you, the cost doesn't go away. You absorb it into yourself.

[19 : 37] You take the pain of their sin into you and choose to swallow it. You choose to take it upon you instead of giving it back in revenge. That's exactly what forgiveness is.

Forgiveness is always costly suffering. It never comes without a cost. Some of you have borne the burden of other people's wrongdoings for years.

In your family, in your close friends, some of you have been tormented by somebody else's sin close by you. You know that forgiveness never comes for free because you've suffered through it. You've absorbed it into yourself. It has been so costly for all of these years. You know what that's like. We can't expect God who came to offer forgiveness for divine justice to the whole cosmos to do something that we can't do.

Forgiveness always costs. It always costs. We can't expect them just to wipe it away. It always costs something. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when he was imprisoned by the Nazis, he talked about it this way.

[20 : 47] My brother's burden, which I must bear, is not only his outward lot, but quite literally it's his sin. The only way to bear his sin is by forgiving it, and forgiveness is suffering.

Peter's saying that Christianity doesn't say that guilt is a mere social construct because everybody knows in their heart of hearts that that's not true. He also doesn't say that you can try as hard as you can to be good and hope beyond hope that that might be good enough.

Everybody offers something in this sermon entirely different from both those answers, and the answer is this statement. You crucified him. You crucified him.

You see, you put him on the cross and that's the solution to your greatest problems at the very same time.

In other words, in Jesus Christ, ultimate justice meets divine love and mercy at the very same time.

[21 : 56] The cross is the event in history where divine justice met divine mercy, divine mercy and love.

He was a poor carpenter. He was the man from Nazareth, the town that everybody else made fun of on a Roman instrument that had been used thousands of times in the middle of nowhere in a desert-like setting next to the Mediterranean.

In this man, this event, the cross is the meeting of divine justice and ultimate reckless love at the very same moment.

John Huffer goes on and says this about it. The Christian must bear the burden of a brother. He must suffer and endure his brother.

It is only when his brother is a burden that another person really becomes a brother and is not merely an object. Why?

[23 : 01] He says this. The burden of humanity was so heavy for God himself that he had to endure the cross. God bore the burden of humans in the body of Jesus Christ, but he did not bear them reluctantly.

He bore them as a mother carries her little child, as a shepherd enfolds the lost lamb that has been found. God took men upon himself and they weighted him down all the way to the ground, but God remained with them anyway.

What do we do with guilt and sin? Peter is suggesting that Jesus carried it like a heavy burden on his back and it took him all the way down to Hades, is what the term is used in the passage, to the place of death.

Verse 23, this was no mere human error. God did it. He foreknew it. In John chapter 10, Jesus foretold his death by saying, I will lay down my life, but in three days I have the power to take it back up again.

When Peter says, you crucified him, it's not merely, it's our fault, it's the fault of sin, but he had the power to lay down his life.

[24 : 27] He did it voluntarily. He did it out of love. It's the event of divine justice and ultimate love and mercy and he had the power to take it back up again. Tolstoy's question of the inevitability of death, what's the answer?

Peter says in verse 24, you crucified him, but God raised him from the dead. Verse 24 talks about the resurrection, defeating the problem of death, the second problem that every single human faces.

He says in that verse that Jesus Christ's resurrection loosened the pangs of death. Now, what in the world does that mean? It's a metaphor, but it's probably better, or it could be translated more clearly, loosened the ropes of death or the cords of death.

In other words, the metaphor is saying this, that around every single human being is wrapped ropes, cords. It's an ancient picture of how somebody's pulled down to death, pulled down to Hades because of what they've done.

He's saying that in the resurrection, Jesus Christ has come and literally cut the cords, cut the ropes out that are unfolded around you, that are pulling you down in this life towards the inevitability of death.

[25 : 39] He has loosened them. He has cut them. You see that Christianity is so different from every other religion. No other religion, no other philosophy, no other worldview has ever offered the answer to the problem of death in the form of an embodied person.

What's the solution to death? A man, Jesus Christ, the fact that he rose from the grave bodily, that's what he's saying. The answer to death is that Jesus Christ has a body.

No more are these notions of floating up into the sky with just your soul and eternal bliss. The answer to the problem of death is that Jesus Christ has given us the power to be embodied with him forever.

That's what the resurrection pronounces. In him, both problems that face every single human being are solved.

The guilt and the problem of death, human wrongdoing and the inevitability of facing our end. Both problems are solved. Both problems of the heart.

[26 : 48] So Jesus makes sense, he's saying, of 1500 years of prophecy that he was witnessed by hundreds and thousands across the Mediterranean having risen from the dead.

He performed miracles and wonders in his lifetime. His resurrection turned the world upside down. They saw him crucified and they saw him walk after he had been in the grave.

Peter is saying not only that, but he satisfies the two great dilemmas of the human heart, your guilt and your need to escape death.

In him, divine justice and love meet. What should you do? What should you do? That's the question that he leaves us with in verse 37.

That's the question they ask, what do we do? And he says, repent and be baptized. Now we can't deal with baptism today, but just for a second, and the last thing, repentance.

[27 : 50] What's the essence of how you become a Christian? That's really what Peter's getting at by saying repent. It's the essence of how you become a Christian. Becoming Christian means your sin becomes personal.

You own it. Every single one of us in here, we all know that we break the rules. You break the rules in life. You broke the rules.

Some of you broke the rules this morning. You sped. You broke traffic law. You break the rules all the time. Sometimes you break them in minor ways. Sometimes you break them in major ways. You break them against the state.

You break them against each other. You break the rules of the household. You break the rules of your job. Every single human being knows that they break rules. We all know it. We'll do it this week.

The difference in repentance, the essence of Christian belief, and simply knowing you break the rules is this. Repentance is transitioning from saying, I know I break rules and I don't want to get caught.

[28 : 56] To I know that I broke him. You see, it's transitioning from saying I know I do bad stuff to saying I know that I actually broke the man.

Jesus Christ, the man of power, I broke him. That's repentance. Sin becomes personal and you own it.

And he says in verse 38 that when you repent, the promise is the forgiveness of your sins, the satisfaction of the problem of the human heart.

This is just two sentences. I was reading a testimony this week of a pastor and he talked about how earlier in his life he had really big issues with pride, you know, with self-assertion, with competition, with talking about himself too much, those sorts of things that many of us struggle with.

And throughout his life, he had constantly been brought back to the image of the cross. He had been presented to him on multiple occasions. He had come back and wrestled with people telling him the cross.

[30 : 13] This is divine justice and ultimate mercy in one event. And he wrestled with it. And he wrestled with it. And he wrestled with it. The cross. And he said, finally one day the fear and the pride that had captured my heart for so long was finally dislodged.

He writes this. The drive to prove myself, the drive to be well thought of, the drive to win approval and acclaim from others, it was gone.

The fact that Jesus had to die for me, that I crucified him, humbled me out of my pride. But even more, the fact that Jesus was glad to die for me.

That assured me out of all my fear and insecurity. Let's pray together. Father, we ask, O Lord, that we would repent, that you would change our hearts, that we would see the case for Christ, that we would see that this man has been attested to by many and that in him is the solution to the great problems of life.

And we ask, O Lord, that you would give us hearts of flesh so that we might believe in turn and change our minds. Even today, even if we've been Christians for so long, Lord, we need repentance.

[31 : 36] And if we haven't ever been, ever confessed, Lord, we need repentance. And so we ask for all of us that it would be true for us. I'm glad that you would do this work by the Spirit in the name of Jesus.

Amen.