

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL BY CUTTING HUMAN HEARTS

Acts 2:37-41

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world that is littered with promises of salvation: Politicians promising salvation from high taxes, loss of jobs, a polluted environment, the collapse of the economy, and terrorist attacks; doctors promising salvation from disease and disability; beer makers promising salvation from loneliness and boredom; pharmaceutical companies promising salvation from impotence and depression and restless leg syndrome; sports team managers promising salvation from perennial disappointment and the list goes on and on. Every person in this room is daily bombarded with dozens of declarations that we need saving and that there are people and products ready and able to save.

We not only receive external messages regarding our need for salvation and promises to meet our needs but we ourselves feel the need for salvation from a variety of maladies and miseries. Sitting here this morning are some who feel unloved and rejected and yearn for someone to care about them. Others are worried and fearful about their financial situation and long for adequate income or a bailout to give them security. Still others are concerned about their health and long for a diagnosis and a cure. Many parents fear their children will not succeed in life and yearn for someone to cure their kids. There are students who fear getting bad grades or not choosing the right major and want salvation from academic failure. Again, the list goes on and changes from week to week.

It is into a culture like this and to people like us that God announces his promise for salvation. His announcement contains both a description of what we need saving from and a declaration of how he aims to save. This is what we are observing in the second chapter of Acts. God, by means of his Holy Spirit, through the apostle Peter is announcing to a crowd of several thousand Jews the danger they are in and the way in which God offers to rescue them from their danger. Peter, by beginning with the observable fact that 120 Jewish people from the region of Galilee are in the streets of Jerusalem declaring the wonders of God in foreign languages that they did not know prior to this moment has proven that Jesus is the long promised Messiah and the divine Lord of the universe. The trouble that these people are in is that they murdered the Messiah who is now waiting at God's right hand for the day when he will return and all of his enemies will be put under his feet. In other words, the one whom they mocked and spit upon and tortured and murdered by the hands of the Romans is now in the position of highest authority in the universe and is merely waiting for that day when his Father will subdue by force all of his enemies.

Peter, in our text this morning tells these people that there is a way to escape the just wrath and anger of God against them. There is a way, as Peter says in v. 40, to be saved from this crooked generation. Though they murdered the Messiah, there is a way to not perish, to not be numbered among the enemies of God but to become his friend. In the second half of v. 38 Peter describes salvation as the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit. (The gift that God gives through Christ is the Holy Spirit, not speaking in foreign languages or any other of the gifts of the HS. I know this because of the prophecy from Joel that Peter quoted, his statement that Jesus has received the promised HS and poured him out on the church in v. 23 and because the gift of the HS is the chief characteristic of the new covenant that Jesus has secured by his death.) Why does Peter describe salvation with these two features: forgiveness of sins and the gift of the HS? In order to understand why Peter describes salvation in this fashion we need to understand the crime we have committed.

Jesus is presented by Peter as the Son of the King who came into this world to bear witness to the glory of his Father and to establish his Father's rule upon this earth. The King is no despot but a gracious king who has provided every human being with life and every pleasure we have known in this world. In the case of the Jewish people he also chose them out of all the nations of the world to be his people. He spoke to them and provided for them in even greater ways than he has the rest of humanity. Now we, even though we have only

been treated kindly by this king, hate him and are opposed to him. Therefore, when his Son showed up we murdered him. So the problem facing us is that God is justly angry with us and is planning on destroying those who murdered his son.

But, because God is gracious and loving he decided before the world was made that he was going to bring some of those who murdered his son to live with him forever. In order to show forth the wonder of his love, God determined to save, to adopt, to bring into a personal relationship with himself some of the murderers. There are two apparently insurmountable problems to God doing this. First, how is it just to forgive murderers and reward them with a life of blessing and joy in God's kingdom forever? How do you justly forgive and reward murderers? The second problem is that not a single one of those who murdered Jesus, which, as we saw last week includes all of us, wants to live with God. Yes, none of us wants to be punished for murdering Jesus but all of us, by nature hate God; that is why we murdered his son. If God brings us to live in his home all we will do is try to murder him and to destroy his kingdom because we are his enemies.

Notice how forgiveness of sins and the giving of the HS answer these two problems. First, God can justly forgive us because he put our sins on Jesus and killed his own son in our place. "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us..." So when God forgives one of those who murdered his son and someone protests that he is being a corrupt judge God simply answers that he killed his son so that he could forgive this murderer. Second, the giving of the HS, as is so clearly spelled out in the OT, changes us. The HS gives us hearts that love God and trust God and yearn to please God so that when God brings us to live with him we no longer want to murder and destroy him and his people but we now want to serve him. So God provides for the salvation of some of his enemies by means of Jesus' life, death and resurrection which secures our pardon, preserves God's justice and obtains for us new hearts that trust and love God. That is the salvation that Peter declares in our text. However, here is the other question that must be answered: which of God's enemies are saved? How does anyone know if they are among those who have been forgiven and given the gift of the HS? In the rest of the sermon we are going to see four things that identify those whom God saves from his just anger.

MAIN POINT

The people whom God saves from his just anger are those who...

I. Are cut to the heart (v. 37)

The first characteristic of those who are saved is they are people who have "cut" or "pierced" hearts. This is the only time the word translated "they were cut to the heart" is used in the NT. However, it is used eleven times in the Greek translation of the OT. It is a word that communicates a very strong emotional response to things that have happened. Here are some of the emotions that this word describes: It describes the emotion of Isaac when he realizes that he was tricked into blessing Jacob, the younger son, rather than Esau, the older son. It describes the emotions of the sons of Jacob when they find out that their sister has been raped by the son of the king of Shechem. It identifies how Aaron felt after God killed his two sons for bringing unauthorized fire into the Holy Place. Then there is its use when the wicked King Ahab takes possession of the vineyard of Naboth, whom his wife Jezebel executed on the basis of false witnesses. God sends the prophet Elijah to Ahab to tell him, 'This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?' ... 'This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood-- yes, yours!' ... 'I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel-- slave or free... "And also concerning Jezebel the LORD says: 'Dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel.' "Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country." In other words, God tells his enemy Ahab how is going to punish him for his great sins. How does Ahab respond to this message? He "was pierced to the heart" and went about in sackcloth and fasted. In other words he was stricken with his guilt and with terror of God. Finally, the prophet Isaiah, when he has a vision of Yahweh in his heavenly palace surrounded by the mighty cherubim says about himself, "Woe to me! I am pierced for I am a man of unclean lips and I have seen the Lord." In every situation it describes the spontaneous emotional response to actual loss or the threat of loss. In each of these situations, if the person was

not "cut to the heart", we would conclude there was something wrong with him. You do not "decide" to be cut to the heart; it is the spontaneous response to actual loss or the threat of loss.

So when the text says these people were cut to the heart it means that when they heard that Jesus was "Lord and Christ" they were overwhelmed with a sense of their guilt before God and the justice of God in executing them. They felt horrible about what they had done and about what they deserved from God. Their cry, "Brothers, what shall we do?" is a desperate statement. "Look what we have done. How can we escape this judgment? We deserve everything God will pour out on us. What hope is there that we can escape from his just wrath against us for killing his son? What reason can we give to God to have mercy upon us? Can there be any hope of pardon for sinners like us? What prayers can we pray? What promises can we make? What works can we perform that have any hope of turning aside the just anger of this great God?" This is the way that those who have been convicted of their sin by the Holy Spirit speak. Have you ever been cut to the heart because you know how great is your sin and how right it would be for God to send you to hell? Have you ever despaired of God's pardon as you contemplate the greatness of your sins? While the intensity and duration of this emotion will vary from person to person, yet it is not possible for a person to be rescued from God's wrath who has not in some measure felt their guilt and terror of that wrath. The reason for this is simple: if you do not feel the guilt of your sins nor fear God's judgment against you for your sins, then why in the world would you call on Jesus to save you from something you do not feel you need?

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II. Repent of sin and believe in Christ (v. 38)

In response to the cry of these wounded sinners Peter answers first with the command to repent. This is a call for them to stop living and acting as the enemies of God and of his Christ. They must turn from dependence upon all other means of salvation. They must stop regarding Jesus as if he is a nothing and a nobody and must now treat him as if he is the most exalted person in the universe. They must be changed in their entire person, affections, choices, words and actions. Their whole life must be turned around. They have been going in one direction which led them to kill Jesus. Now they must turn and go in the exact opposite direction, especially in relation to Jesus.

I can think of no one else who has helped me to understand the nature of true repentance than John Piper. We tend to think of repentance as merely moral reformation, we stop doing bad things and start doing good things or simply a change of mind about something. However, as Dr. Piper says in his book, "Desiring God," repentance is a far deeper reorientation of our hearts, what we believe is valuable and trustworthy and delightful. He says, "Once we had not delight in God and Christ was just a vague historical figure. What we enjoyed was food and friendships and productivity and investments and vacations and hobbies and games and reading and shopping and sex and sports and art and TV and travel...but not God. He was an idea, even a good one, and a topic of conversation; but he was not a treasure of delight." So that repentance is not just moral reformation but a reorienting of our entire life to Christ. Other suns were at the center of our universe but now we have turned away from them and Christ alone is the center of our universe. Thus, as you can see it is impossible to talk about repentance without at the same time talking about faith. These are two sides of the same coin. You cannot have repentance without faith and you cannot have faith without repentance.

Peter makes exactly this point. When Peter commands them to be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins", he is not saying that baptism is necessary for forgiveness but explaining that baptism is for those who have called upon the name of the Jesus and, as a result have been forgiven. The "for" is being used like it is on a wanted poster down at the post office. When the wanted poster says, "wanted for murder" it doesn't mean the person is wanted so that he can commit a murder it means he is wanted because of his having committed a murder already. By mentioning "the name of Jesus Christ" here he is drawing attention back to v.

21 where, quoting the prophet Joel, he says, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” So to be baptized in the name of Jesus is to be a person who has called upon the name of Jesus and thus the cleansing that baptism signifies is true for you because Jesus has responded to your call. Calling on the name of Jesus signifies faith by another word. When a child calls out for his or her parent in the middle of the night he is expressing his need for help and his confidence in the parent’s willingness and ability to help. When you call the plumber to come fix your leaky pipes you are expressing your need and your faith in the plumber to meet your need. The fact that it is the “name of Jesus, the Messiah” in which baptism takes place means that baptism is only effective when based upon all that Jesus is and all that he has done. The “name” signifies the person and work of Jesus. He is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity who became man and lived a perfect life and suffered and died for the sins of all who will trust him and who has now risen from the dead and is seated at God’s right hand. All this you confess and believe and depend upon when you call upon his name and thus baptism signifies that Christ has cleansed you as you have called upon him to do so.

So all who have been saved from this crooked generation are those who have repented of their sins and trusted in Jesus Christ. Some of you may remember the exploits of General John Powell. He is most well known as the man who mapped the Grand Canyon. He rafted down the entire Colorado River, mapping it as he went. He records in his journal how, on one occasion they pulled off the river and he and another member of his crew climbed up the cliff bordering the river in order to look ahead and see what was coming. He tells how he was climbing first and came to a place where he could neither go forward nor backward on the cliff. He told his companion that he was stuck and so he climbed around General Powell and up to a ledge several feet above him. When he lay down on the ledge he could not reach General Powell so he took off his pants and dangled them down in front of the General to grab so he could pull him to safety. The problem was that General Powell only had one arm as his other arm was shot off in the Civil War. So in order to grab the pants he had to let go of his hold on the cliff. In order to be “saved” he had to repent of his grasp on the cliff and trust in his friend’s strength to pull him to safety. This is exactly what repentance and faith is. You must let go of every other thing you trust in and rely upon and love and you must hold fast to Christ alone. You cannot call upon any other Savior, only Christ. The promise here is that all who repent and who call upon his name will receive forgiveness of their many sins and the Holy Spirit, the agent of divine life. Have you repented of all other saviors and trusted in Christ alone? Are you a repenting and believing person? Are you daily forsaking the ways in which you seek joy in sin and the pleasures of this world in order to find your life in Christ? Have you repented of trusting in your own goodness or sincerity or prayers or religious activity or “niceness” to gain God’s approval and are you holding onto Christ alone as the only reason God should love you and accept you?

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III. Are graciously called by God from among all people (v. 39)

Peter next tells them that the promise of God’s salvation, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the HS is offered not only to them but to their children and to all who are far off. The phrase, “to you and to your children” is a stock OT phrase that refers to the people of Israel through succeeding generations. It is not a reference to each individual Israelite and every one of their biological children. The promise was made to Abram and his descendants after him that God would be their God and they would be his people. This again connects back to Joel’s prophecy confirming that young and old, sons and daughters will all be the recipients of the Holy Spirit. All of God’s people without distinction will be saved throughout all the generations of human existence. But also, note this phrase, “all who are far off.” It is quite clear that Peter meant by this the Jewish people who were living outside of the land of Israel. However, Luke records Peter speaking this clause to show that Peter is speaking better than he knew at the moment. This phrase is used in Isaiah 57:19 to refer to the Gentiles. Paul uses this same phrase in Ephesians 2:17 to show how Christ has, by the gospel, made Jew and Gentile, those

who are near and those who are far away, into one people of God. So Peter and Luke show here that God's saving work is not limited to just this generation of Jewish people but he is saving people from all generations and from all racial and ethnic groups. There is no age limit or racial limit or socio-economic limit on who can be saved.

Notice however, that while God saves through time from all peoples he does not save all people. Those who are saved are all those whom God himself calls. Here again we have another reminder of the sovereign grace of God. Humans don't decide who goes to heaven, God does. He is calling his people from all the nations of the world by means of the proclamation of the gospel. All those whom he calls to himself will call upon the name of Jesus. It is his call that is first and primary and effectual. In light of this clause we can see that there is problem with my little illustration about Gen. Powell. Do you see what it is? Whereas Gen. Powell lets go of the cliff and then he clings to the pants, what those who repent of all other saviors and cling to Christ discover is that He was holding them all along. In fact, while we may not be consciously aware of it, the only reason we are able to let go of the cliff is because we know we are held and so we merely place our hands on his wrists while he pulls us to safety. We are cut, we call, we repent, we believe because God calls us first.

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IV. Welcome God's word and show it in their obedience (v. 41)

In v. 41 we see the visible effects of Peter's proclamation of the gospel and his exhortation to "be saved from this crooked generation." But again, the visible effects are just that, they are the fruit of repentance and faith. The call of God creates repentance and faith which leads to obedience. First, we are told that from among this crowd of Jewish people 3000 welcomed (NIV: accepted) the words of Peter. The word that is used here is a very powerful word. It means to warmly and gladly welcome someone or something. It is usually used to describe how people welcome those they value into their presence and homes. It is an enthusiastic, heartfelt embracing of someone or something.

There is a massive contrast between the beginning and end of this passage. In v. 37 these people are cut to the heart by the overwhelming sense of guilt that the words of Peter have brought to them. But here at the end there is an overwhelming sense of joy in the words of Peter. They embrace the entire message with joy. That means they are glad they are condemned by this word and they are glad they are forgiven by this word. They are reacting to the word of Peter like the cancer patient reacts to the word of the doctor. The doctor tells him or her that he or she has cancer and the patient is cut to the heart but then the doctor tells her that there is a treatment for the cancer so she can be saved. So he welcomes this word from the doctor. He trusts his word and then the evidence of his faith is that he obeys it, he submits to the doctor's treatment. Do you see that this is exactly what these 3000 folks do? They submit to water baptism as the visible expression of their welcoming his word. They obey because they believe. They openly identify with the people of God because they believe and welcome the message of Peter, because they call on the name of Jesus, because they repent of their sins. These people are not forgiven because they are baptized they submit to baptism because they are forgiven.

The effect caused by this first Christian sermon is the effect that God intends for his word to have in our lives not only at the beginning of our Christian life but throughout the course of our lives. The word of the gospel is the power of God for our salvation. It is a word that cuts us to the heart, calls us to repent of our love for and dependence upon everything that is not God, creates in us faith that leads us to gladly welcome God's commands not as a burden but as the doctor's prescription to a healthy life. The fact that we have repented and

believed the promise of the gospel and thus had our sins forgiven and received the HS is that we obey God in the company of his church.

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