

Kenny Silva – Acts 2:14-21 – This is That: God’s Promise Fulfilled

In 1845, a fungus-like organism called *Phytophthora infestans* found its way into Ireland, and ruined up to a half of that year’s potato crop. Over the next 7 years, that infestation would reduce Ireland’s potato yield by about 75%.

Now, if you’re like my son and you hate potatoes, that might not sound so bad. But in the mid-nineteenth century, potatoes were a staple crop for Ireland. Poor farmers needed them to make their living *and* feed their families.

So, as a result of this blight, about a million people died from starvation and related causes. Another million emigrated to Great Britain and North America.

During the famine, the Irish repeatedly petitioned Queen Victoria and Parliament for relief. Some help came, but not very much. In fact, the civil servant responsible for overseeing Irish relief—a man by the name of Sir Charles Trevelyan—saw the famine as an act of divine judgment. In 1848, he described it as “a direct stroke of an all-wise and all-merciful Providence’, one which laid bare ‘the deep and inveterate root of social evil.’”

Not exactly what you want to hear from the guy who’s supposed to be in charge of relief.

Now, I know this is kind of a dark place to begin a sermon. I probably should’ve started with two jokes instead of one. But, today, we’re going to be talking about the dawn of a new age, and to appreciate newness, we need to get a sense for the old.

So, I want you to imagine those people who lived through the Potato Famine—starving to death, wondering if and why God was responsible for their suffering.

Now, imagine a voice crying out—a prophetic shout saying, “Yes, this *is* God’s judgment. And if you don’t repent, it’s going to get even worse. He will bring a judgment down on you that’ll make you pine for the good ol’ famine days.”

Would you be offended? I know I would be.

But what if that voice added, “If you *do* repent, God will restore to you all that was lost. Even better, He’ll make it so that nothing like this ever happens again. God will usher in a golden age in your land marked by signs and wonders and abundance for all.”

What would you think then? Would it give you hope?

Now, imagine you aren’t in mid-nineteenth century Ireland. Instead, you’re in the kingdom of Judah, and the date is somewhere around the middle of the 1st millennium BC—give or take a hundred years. Oh, and that prophetic voice? His name’s Joel.

If you can do that, then you’ll get a good sense of the context into which Joel preached. Israel had suffered its own blight due to an overwhelming infestation of locusts, and Joel’s job was to explain that famine as a kind of down payment on divine justice.

Now, the words Anne read for us earlier represent the promise that awaited Judah on the other side of their repentance.

They describe what God would do: He would send grain, wine, and oil. He would restore the land from all that'd ravaged it—from the devouring locust to the enemies of God's people. But the language is almost other-worldly. It points to a future state of affairs in which Israel would be practically invincible.

Really, the promise Joel describes sounds a whole lot like heaven.

Imagine how impactful his words would be if you were huddled on a dirt floor, wondering which of your kids would be the first to starve. Or if you'd just watched an enemy nation march in, burn down your house, and kill your husband or carry your wife off into captivity.

It's not hard to see, then, why Joel's words would have made their way into the literary DNA of Israel. They, along with similar passages from Isaiah and Ezekiel, came to shape the eschatological imagination of all God's people. Or to use less daunting language, they shaped the way people thought about salvation and the future for centuries to come.

So, when Peter got up hundreds of years later on the day of Pentecost and began his sermon with a quote from the book of Joel, He tapped right into that imagination and let everyone know: the future is here. The time of God's promise has come.

I'd like to invite you to open your Bibles to Acts 2:14...

Today, we're going to look at the first part of Peter's Pentecost sermon. Pentecost, you may recall, was that great day when God sent down His Spirit in power, filled His disciples, and miraculously enabled them to speak in languages that weren't their own.

In today's text, we're going to see Peter begin to explain the meaning of these things:

Acts 2:14–21 (ESV)

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. ¹⁵ For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ " 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;

¹⁸ even on my male servants and female servants

- in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.
- 19 And I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;
- 20 the sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.
- 21 And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

If you'll recall from last week, the crowds in Jerusalem were amazed and perplexed to see a bunch of backwater Galileans declaring the mighty works of God in languages they'd never learned. Some were so amazed, they asked, "What does this mean?"

But others mocked; they thought the disciples had had a bit too much to drink.

In v.14, we see Peter rise as one of the eleven to answer the people. In a subtle way, this tells us that Peter isn't just speaking for all the disciples, but he's speaking as an authoritative representative of Jesus' inner circle: the twelve apostles.

This points us back to Matthew 16, when Jesus tells him, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." Here, we see Jesus making good on that promise through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Peter stands up and speaks as the spokesman of the apostles and, as we'll soon see, he gives an authoritative interpretation of everything that's just happened.

First, he clears up an objection—this idea that the miraculous speech was really a bit of drunken nonsense. To that, Peter basically says in v. 15, "C'mon guys; it's 9 o'clock in the morning. Obviously, we're not drunk. Something else is going on here."

Now Peter doesn't just address this objection for the sake of winning an easy argument. This isn't Facebook. No, he's clearing the way for the bigger point he wants to make.

And it just so happens that *his* point is the first major point of this sermon:

A New Age Has Dawned.

Peter begins in v. 16, "But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel."

The first thing we need to see here is that, in appealing to Joel, Peter immediately subjects his and the disciples' experience to the authority of Scripture.

This is an important point we shouldn't miss... Often, well-meaning Christians try to do an end-run around the Bible in order to justify their experience.

What does that look like?

- Maybe you've heard something like this before: "I know the Bible says I shouldn't leave my wife, but I've fallen in love with another woman and God wouldn't give me those feelings if He didn't want me to honor them."
- Or: "I know I'm not supposed to sleep with my girlfriend, but we feel like we're married in our hearts."

Don't get me wrong; feelings are an integral part of our human experience. We can't deny them. But we also have to recognize that feelings betray us more often than we care to admit. And our experiences are simply incapable of interpreting themselves.

For that, we need to search God's Word for guidance. That's what Peter does here.

Now, I want you to notice those two words near the beginning of v. 16, "this is." They may not seem important, but that specific word combination in the Greek points to a style of interpretation that was common in Luke's day known as Peshet.

What Peshet did was look at an event and say, "This event that just happened in our experience is the fulfillment of something that was spoken in Scripture."

In this case, the historical event is the Spirit's descent at Pentecost and the Scripture is Joel 2:28-32. So, what Peter is about to do is interpret the disciples' experience as a fulfillment of what Joel had pointed to hundreds of years before.

He begins in v. 17 with the words, "And in the last days,"

The interesting thing here is that that's not exactly what Joel said. In the original Greek version of Joel 2:28 that Peter would've read, the prophet began with the words, "After this..." *not* "in the last days."

So, why the change? It's not that Peter was playing fast and loose with the Scripture. Instead, what he was doing was interpreting and incorporating Joel's words into the New Testament's broader teaching.

In places like 1 Corinthians 10 or Hebrews 1 or 1 Peter 1, the New Testament authors use language like the "last days" or the "last times" or "end of the ages" to refer to the period between Jesus' first and second coming. The idea is that, through Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension He brought about the beginning of the end of time.

So, what Peter is starting to say here is that Joel's prophecy looked forward to this period and that everyone in Jerusalem was witnessing the breaking in of a new age.

How does he make his case for that?

We see how in the rest of the verse. God pours out His Spirit on all flesh, and everybody starts prophesying, seeing visions, and dreaming dreams.

These three things: prophecy, visions, and dreams—were God’s standard method of revealing His will to that special group of people known as the prophets. But in Joel’s vision, one of the signs that the last days have come is that these things will be extended out to *all* God’s people.

Well, what just happened at Pentecost? Did God not pour out His Spirit on all flesh? Were the disciples not speaking on God’s behalf in an undeniably miraculous way?

Remember what Peter is doing here. The crowd had a question: what does all this mean? And Peter’s answer is basically this: “Hey, you guys remember when we were kids in synagogue and the Rabbis told us about how the Messiah would come and send His Spirit and everybody would start prophesying? Well, that just happened.”

We’re going to move on to learn a few more things about this age of the Spirit, but before we do, the thing that impresses me so far is just how ill-prepared the crowds were to recognize the obvious work of God in their midst.

And it made me ask myself, how prepared am *I* to recognize God’s work around me?

Years ago, I heard a pastor tell a story about a child in his church who’d been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. So, he gathered his elders and they prayed—for wisdom, for comfort, and of course for healing.

Well, a few days later, this pastor hears from the parents. They’re ecstatic; they’d just got back from the doctor and it turns out the tumor was really just a shadow on the x-ray.

But the pastor wasn’t relieved. He was livid. How could this doctor make such a grievous mistake? Does he not understand what he just put us all through?

But then an elder took him aside and very patiently said, “Matt, don’t you see what just happened? God answered our prayer.”

That kind of stuff happens around us all the time:

- A job comes through for a loved one.
- A family member gets released from the hospital.
- We stop short just in time to avoid an accident.

Big or small, God is at work in our lives... Are we prepared to notice when He does?

Clearly, Peter’s audience wasn’t.

What makes their ignorance all the more incredible was the language Peter takes up from Joel to describe the way in which the Spirit showed up.

In the second half of v. 17, it says God will pour out His Spirit on all flesh.

The word for pouring out here is a lavish word... it's not what we do when we ever so carefully fill up the communion cups...

It's more like what an athlete does when he dumps a water cooler over his coach's head.

God has dumped out His Holy Spirit on His people. He's not been stingy. He's not held anything back from us.

No, He's poured out His Spirit the same way my kids put syrup on pancakes—lavishly and with nary a concern for what kind of transformation all that sugar's about to cause.

And, as part of His generosity, the Spirit isn't just poured out on a few of God's people.

V. 17 and following tell us it's poured out on *all* flesh. Son or daughter, young or old, male servant or female servant, all God's people will be radically empowered to prophesy—or, as we said last week, to speak God's goodness to the ends of the earth.

This is our second point:

God's Spirit is Poured Out on All.

If you're in Christ, then you've got the Spirit. That's how this works, but it's important we recognize that the unity we all have in the Spirit does not lead to a sort of Christian uniformity where we're all expected to think, act, and speak in exactly the same way.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, the church is a body with many members. A hand is not the same as a foot, but neither can look at the other and say, "I don't need you."

So it is with spiritual gifts. The one Spirit gives us a variety of gifts, and he calls us to embrace that diversity as a means for achieving beautiful unity in the body of Christ.

I want you to hear the encouragement in that... We've been talking a lot about witnessing lately—about sharing our faith with others. You can't read these early chapters of Acts and not be struck by how central that mission is to the church.

But for a lot of us, that emphasis comes with a sense of dread, because we feel woefully inadequate for the task. We look at brothers and sisters around us who seem especially gifted for evangelism, and we despair because we "know" we could never do it like them.

Well, the crux of this passage is that God pours out His Spirit on *every last one* of us. How He works through us as individuals is diverse and wonderful... Some of us will be better than others at evangelism. That's fine. There's no shame in that.

But the fact of the matter is that He has given us all everything we need to tell the world about Him. Together, as a Church, we can live into that mission because Jesus has promised to walk alongside and empower us for it.

So, as you go forth this week, remember that you've got the power.

Now, as we head into the back half of our passage, things start to get a little spooky.

In v.19, Peter begins to talk about how God will show wonders in the heavens and signs on the earth—blood, fire, and vapor of smoke. The sun will turn to darkness and the moon to blood before the great and magnificent Day of the Lord comes.

The first thing we should note about this language is that it shows up in several places in the Prophets, in Matthew's Gospel, and in Revelation. It points to a time when the sun, moon, and stars will fail as God approaches in judgment. It's frequently coupled with images of creation coming undone through earthquakes and natural disasters.

This apocalyptic imagery is associated with what the Prophets call the Day of the Lord—that great and magnificent day when the Lord would finally come to rescue His people.

But what the people of Israel often didn't recognize was that the Day of the Lord wasn't just a day of judgment against their enemies. It was a day of judgment *for them*, too... and that salvation could only come *through* divine justice, not in lieu of it.

This brings us to our final point:

“Salvation is For Those Who Call Upon the Name of the Lord.”

It's easy to read these verses and fix our minds on that future Day when Jesus comes back. But, remember what Peter's doing with this passage from Joel. He's not just using it to say something about the future; he's using it to say something about the *present*.

So when he talks about the wonders God would show in the last days, we need to ask ourselves what in the disciples' present experience would be considered one of the signs?

Here's a good example. Think back to the crucifixion. What happened there just as Jesus died?

Luke 23:44-45 tells us the sun's light failed and darkness covered the whole land.

Isn't it interesting that the day of God's judgment was supposed to be one in which the sun fails and darkness covers the land, and it just so happens that just as Jesus bears God's judgment on the cross, the sun fails and darkness covers the land?

I think this is just one example of what Peter was talking about. According to Paul, the resurrection is another. Listen to what he says to the people of Athens in Acts 17:

30 [God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

The resurrection, in other words, is proof that Jesus is the man appointed by God to bring judgment to the world.

So, can you see it? The wonderous darkness in the heavens above, the sign of resurrection out of the earth below.... These are just two of the many wonders and signs the people had seen in these last days to prove that the age of the Spirit had dawned and the time of God’s judgment was drawing near.

In sum, Peter is saying that, in Christ and by His Spirit, God has come to rescue and empower His people, but that salvation will not come apart from His judgment.

This is why Peter chooses his final word from the book of Joel to be this:

“And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”

For a good Jewish audience, there would’ve been no question about the the name: it was none other than Yahweh, the God of Israel. But as Peter will lay out in the rest of his sermon, that name isn’t exactly what his audience would expects it to be.

To give a bit of a foretaste of where we’re going next week, listen to what he says in v. 36,

“Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

And, in v. 38 –

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins”

And later before the high council in Acts 4:12,

“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Next week, we’re going to spend more time unpacking who Jesus is and why it’s only because of Him that this new age has dawned and the Spirit has been poured out.

But I don’t want a single one of us to leave here today without understanding just what Peter means when he says “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”

In the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, God has come to judge and to save... These last days—this time between the times when Jesus sits upon His throne and rule through the power of His Spirit—are the prelude to that Final Day.

They are a time of God’s patience, a time of mercy, a time of invitation.

Which leads me to ask, “Have you called upon the name of the Lord?”

For some of us, we grew up in the church. We learned to call upon the Lord from our earliest days. For others, this Christianity thing is foreign territory. We didn’t grow up in the church and, frankly, we don’t know what to think about Jesus.

Wherever you’re at in your faith journey, know this:

God created this world and everything in it... He made human beings—you and me—to call upon His name and enjoy life and blessing in His presence.

It doesn’t take much to recognize that humanity has fallen far from that original design.

Every day, we sin against God and one another—in what we do and what we leave undone; in the words we speak and the ones we leave unspoken; in the anger we harbor for one another; the lust we indulge; the prejudices we hang on to.

Yet God so loved this broken world that He sent His only begotten Son to live the life we were meant to live, die the death we were condemned to die, and rise into that perfect mode of life for which we were all made.

This is Good News. And the invitation that Jesus makes to every man, woman, and child through the Spirit-empowered words of His people is this: repent and believe the Gospel.

Turn from your sins, and turn to the loving and merciful Father who desires nothing more than to bring you into His fold... to adopt you as His son or daughter and give you a seat at His table.

In a few minutes, we’re going to come to this table to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Jesus Himself instituted this practice as a time for us to come together and call upon Him.

If you’ve not yet called upon His name, I ask that you’d let the trays pass when they come by. No one’s going to judge you. Nobody’s going to ask you why you didn’t participate. And as you watch us partake of this holy meal, I want to encourage you to ask yourself: why *haven’t* I called upon the name of the Lord? Why don’t I want to sit down at this table? What’s holding me back?

I’m going to pray now as we prepare our hearts for this time. While I do, I’d like to invite the servers and musicians up to take their places. Ok, let’s pray.

Benediction: *“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”* (Jude 24–25, ESV)