

The Last Days

Acts 2:14-21

I have a very simple explanation and definition for all of history. I have a straightforward definition that covers all the ages and epochs of history, from the creation of the world to the fulfillment of the New Heaven and New Earth. I don't mean this to be simplistic or condescending in any way, but actually, quite profound. That explanation is this, that there are three ages that define all history. There are three great epochs that comprehensively describe the whole existence of mankind. And you know what they are—the past, the present, and the future.

Let me fill in that great timetable just a bit, and note this very important point. The transition from one age to the next is defined by the coming of Jesus. His first coming marks the transition from the past to the present age. His incarnation definitively changed all of history, ushering in the present age. And to add just a bit of explanation, there were actually a number of specific, individual events that, together, form what could most comprehensively be called his “first coming.” Those events would include his conception, his birth, his life, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension. To complete the full definition of Jesus' first coming, you would also have to include both Pentecost and then, finally, the final judgment upon the nation of Israel in AD 70, a physical destruction brought about by the Roman army. That destruction of Jerusalem, including the Old Testament temple of worship, is the final aspect of the past age, the age of the Old Testament.

So there was the past, before God dwelt with man on earth in the person of his son. And then there is yet to come, the future age, the new age, the age which is inaugurated when Jesus comes again in triumph, when he returns. In between the first and second coming of Jesus, is this present age. The past, the

present and the future.

And here is the key, I think, to understanding the meaning and significance of Pentecost, as well as much of Old Testament biblical prophecy. This present age is identified in Scripture as “the last days.” That phrase, biblically, defines the time period that began with Jesus' incarnation, his first coming. So we are in “the last days” now, currently, in this present age. And “the last days” will then remain the definition of this present age until Jesus returns a second time.

Let me demonstrate that in the Bible.

Heb. 1:1 “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.”

So, the contrast is between “time past,” before Jesus, when God spoke through the Old Testament prophets, and these last days, when God now speaks through his incarnate son! The whole book of Hebrews is committed to an exposition of what it is that Jesus has done “in these last days,” in his incarnation, showing his superiority to and fulfillment of all that had gone before.

And in our study of the Book of Acts, this day of Pentecost shows to us the outward evidence of that transition from the past age to the present age, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. That outward evidence is what we studied last week,

v.1 “When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. 2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. 4 And

they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

Just a very brief review from last week. Note the emphasis that these “tongues” were actual foreign languages, and they were a form of special revelation from God himself. Tongues are a form of prophetic revelation, God putting his words in the mouth of his prophets, so that what they spoke was the very word of God. And remember the purpose of those languages, namely the obvious ability of people from every nation, every language, to receive the gospel in their own language so that they would be able to hear and to believe, and thus to be saved. And that is where we begin our study today, with the first sermon preached after Pentecost. It is the first sermon preached in the last days, according to Peter’s quotation from the Old Testament prophecy of Joel.

v.14 “But Peter, standing up with the eleven, raised his voice and said to them, “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and heed my words. 15 For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. 16 But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 17 ‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh...”

I should note, it is evident Peter takes a leadership role among the 12 apostles. You often hear me emphasize that Peter wasn’t the first pope nor did he transfer his preeminence to his papal successor. But he was, nonetheless, a leader among the apostles, and he speaks to those gathered in Jerusalem on this great day of Pentecost. Obviously, he answers the objection that some had that those who were speaking in tongues were drunk. That was a ridiculous suggestion, given the early time of the day. The third hour would have been 9 am., since the Jewish reckoning identified 6 am as the beginning of the day. They

weren’t drunk. Instead, preaches Peter, this great event is the fulfillment of a very old prophecy, the prophecy of Joel. Joel 2:28-32.

So what is the significance of all this? What is so important about this pouring out of the Holy Spirit? First of all, I’ll emphasize again a point I made last week as well.

I. THE LAST DAYS ARE CHARACTERIZED BY THE UNIVERSAL FOCUS OF THE GOSPEL PROMISE.

For clarity’s sake, I do want to understand “universal” as international. In other words, all nations, all languages, people everywhere on earth. And remember, in the past, in the Old Testament, before Jesus, the focus of the covenant promise of God with his people was focused only upon one nation, the nation of Israel. In the last days, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the focus of that promise of salvation is universal...all nations.

That is the meaning of John’s words in,

1 John 2:1 “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”

Also, John the Baptist’s words,

John 1:29 “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

So now, in this present age,

Rom. 10:11 “For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all

who call upon Him. 13 For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

In fact,

Gal. 3:26 “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

All of that emphasis upon the universal or international focus of the gospel is made clear at Pentecost with,

A. The universal (international) presence of the Holy Spirit.

So says Joel, quoted in our text in Acts 2, v.17 “And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh.”

Let me emphasize something else very closely related to that idea, namely,

B. The universal (international) presence of the Word of God.

The Holy Spirit wasn’t just for display, it wasn’t just an outward show. Pentecost wasn’t just for the impression which would be created by such a spectacular event. Rather, the point of Pentecost, the point of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, was so that all the nations, everyone, would receive the Word of God. No longer would it be just Israel, receiving the word of God through the prophets. Now, everyone would have God’s word. In their own language so that they could hear it and understand it, that they might believe it!

Remember,

Heb. 1:1 “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.”

God spoke to his people in the past, “at sundry times and in divers manners” as the original King James puts it. Here and there, at various times, in many different ways. But now...now he has spoken through Jesus his son. And the word of Jesus is universal, it goes to every nation, every language. So we read,

v.17b “...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.”

It is worth noting that God had actually been silent for 400 years before Jesus came. No prophets from the days of Malachi until Jesus, no word of the Lord at all. So this event of Pentecost was all the more spectacular in the scope of the presence of the word of God. That word would now come to everyone!

Then notice how God marked this great transition from the past age to the present age.

II. THE LAST DAYS BEGAN WITH A GREAT DEMONSTRATION OF MIRACULOUS SIGNS AND WONDERS.

Verse 19 speaks of wonders! Miracles!

v.19-20

Those signs, quoting Joel, were clearly,

A. Signs of God’s judgment.

Joel was prophesying of God’s judgment. RC Sproul describes the context of Joel’s prophecy this way. “The land had been ravaged by a plague of locusts, which had come through the

land and eaten all that was green and completely destroyed the crops of the people of Israel. It was calamitous. God spoke judgment to the people through Joel, because the people had turned away from the Lord.”

The words seem so plain. “Blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke.” Those are words of judgment. And verse 20 especially, “the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood.” We find those same words of judgment in the book of Revelation,

Rev. 6:12 “I looked when He opened the sixth seal, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. 13 And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind. 14 Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place. 15 And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, 16 and said to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! 17 For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”

Now, if you are thinking a lot, you might wonder why this prophecy of judgment is attached to Pentecost and not warning us about the future judgment to come at the end of the age. So why does Peter quote Joel’s prophecy of judgment? I would answer this way, that Jesus’ first coming was a day of judgment as well, a day of judgment upon unbelieving, Old Testament Israel. The warning of judgment against them for their unbelieving rebellion was fulfilled by Jesus’ first coming, as they were judged even to extinction as a nation. And there was a darkening of the sun when Jesus was crucified. And there were also terrible judgments in the form of astronomical disturbances at

the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, reported by faithful historians, the time of the climactic judgment that fell upon that Old Testament.

And, to add another layer of depth of insight, that destruction upon Jerusalem is itself a type and prophecy of the final judgment to come. So even the first coming of Jesus brought with it the threat of judgment, and so Pentecost comes with miraculous signs representing that judgment. And looking ahead to the second coming, which also brings with it the prophesied judgment of God upon unbelief. The point is that Jesus has come, in the flesh, and this new age is begun. And he is coming again, at the end of these last days, at the end of this age. And so this worldwide emphasis of the gospel promise brings with it a warning of impending judgment at the end of the age. That warning comes with,

B. Signs of an expectation of the coming of the Day of the Lord.

v.20

Again to quote Sproul, “The crisis moment in world history was the coming of Christ into the world. For those who were being redeemed, the day of the Lord was a day of light and brightness and joy, but for those who were perishing, it was a day of unspeakable darkness, as predicted by Joel.”

So even as the Pentecost was an emphasis upon the worldwide focus of the gospel promise, it also brought the warning of judgment to those who would remain in their unbelief. And it clearly brings that warning throughout this age, warning all who would hear the gospel, that,

v.20 “The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of

the LORD.”

The God who brings the gospel to all the languages of the world also warns that world of a great judgment. So much of the book of Revelation is organized around that theme, as was the warning of the prophet Joel, whom Peter quotes in this first sermon after Pentecost.

But...let me get back to the promise of the gospel. There is a warning of judgment, but there is something else to emphasize in these last days. The very warning of judgment makes it plain and obvious that the gospel offers an escape from that judgment. And that is what these last days are all about!

III. THE LAST DAYS DEFINE THE AGE OF SALVATION.

So this present day, today, is the day of salvation. And the warning of judgment is always used in this age as an invitation of believe in Jesus, to trust in Jesus for your salvation. So we read in Hebrews 3, quoting from Psalm 95,

Heb. 3:7 “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you will hear His voice, 8 Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness, 9 Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years. 10 Therefore I was angry with that generation, And said, ‘They always go astray in their heart, And they have not known My ways.’ 11 So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’ ” 12 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; 13 but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, 15 while it is said: “Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

That’s the invitation of the gospel, beginning with the word “Today.” As long as it is called “Today,” as long as we live in this present age, there is hope. There is an invitation. So the gospel is well preached in this context, “Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts.” If you are alive today, do not harden your hearts. Do not “be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” Do not rebel against God in your unbelief. Instead, trust in the Lord Jesus for your salvation, as he is offered to you in the gospel.

That is what these last days are all about, they are about the proclamation of the gospel to all the nations of the world. And what Pentecost makes clear is that,

A. Salvation is connected to the name of Jesus.

And that’s why Peter quotes Joel, because Joel, even in the context of the Old Covenant, speaks a great word of hope in the midst of his warning. We read verse 20 in our text, coming from Joel 2, but we also read verse 21 from that same prophecy.

v.20 “The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. 21 And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved.”

As we will study next time, Peter will explicitly identify Jesus because in verse 22, but he grounds that declaration of the gospel in Joel’s great prophecy of Pentecost. Peter connects all of this to Jesus. Salvation from judgment comes through faith in Jesus, calling upon Jesus. “Whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved.”

And his reference is clearly Jesus. Just read the next verse, verse 22, where Peter identifies Jesus. To be even more plain, I will skip ahead to,

Acts 4:10 "...let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. 11 This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' 12 Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

That's the message which we must preach throughout these last days, throughout this whole age. We must preach Jesus, salvation from sin and judgment through faith and trust in Jesus, "for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Rom. 10:8 "But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. 13 For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."

I'll end with a re-emphasis upon the pentecostal focus of the universal nature of the gospel promise.

B. Salvation is promised to all without restriction.

And that what is so startling to read from Joel even in the Old Testament, but it is what Peter makes so plain. The emphasis is the word "whoever."

v.13 "For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be

saved."

Jew or Gentile. "Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." Male or female. "Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." Rich or poor, slave or free. "Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." That is the apostolic, pentecostal invitation and proclamation of the gospel. And that is the gospel I will preach here, in some form, every week, every sermon. "Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."

And that means each one of you, every one of you. And everyone to whom you speak. For there will be a judgment at the end of this age.

Heb. 9:27 "...it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, 28 so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation."

1 John 5:11 "And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."