

Times of Refreshing

Acts 3:17-21

I took advantage of the opportunity this past week of vacation to do much more reading than I do during any normal week. Actually, in the average week, I seldom do any additional reading beyond that which is a necessary part of my study for sermon preparation and Bible study notes. So this past week I finished a biography of Charles Hodge, who taught for more than 50 years in the mid-1800s at Princeton Seminary, and if you have been in the adult Sunday School class you would know all about the context and work of that great seminary. I also read quite far into a biography of Jonathan Edwards, a name known to most Christians and to most anyone familiar with American history. He is always mentioned among the greatest of all American thinkers and theologians, and some would argue that he is the greatest of them all—the greatest theological mind in the history of our country.

He is best known now, perhaps, for his theological writings and books, but he was, first and foremost, a pastor, and he is most closely identified with the 24 years of his pastoral ministry at Northampton, Massachusetts, from 1727 to 1751. In the midst of those years occurred what history records as the Great Awakening, which was a series of genuine revivals in many cities and towns in many of the American colonies, beginning about 1740. That revival clearly came to Northampton, and the biography I am now reading contains many accounts of that remarkable experience, an experience that brought about such evidence of repentance and faith that can only be explained by the sudden and supernatural intervention and evidence of God's saving work as is promised in the gospel.

What struck me in some of the descriptions contained in that book was the emphasis of Edwards' preaching upon the basic

and fundamental call of the gospel for repentance for sin and saving trust in the the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of those sins. So this great theologian, arguably the best philosophical mind our country has ever produced, a man noted by an earlier biographer to spend up to 13 hours per day in his study, would devote the energy and fervency of his sermons to the most basic invitation found in the Bible, to repent of sin and to believe in Jesus.

And God used it in a marvelous way. The whole town of Northampton was changed. The colonies themselves were changed, transformed—by the saving power of God to transform a fallen and sinful creature into a true and genuine child of God.

Edwards known for his theology, his good, faithful, biblical theology, his reformed theology and exposition of the great doctrines of the Christian faith so greatly influenced by the Puritans. His books provide an abiding testimony that remains profitable and edifying for anyone to read today, but the effectiveness of his ministry was not due to the mere content of those books. It was due to the faithfulness with which he warned his hearers of the wrath of God due to all us because of our sin, and then exhorted them to find the forgiveness of those sins through faith in Jesus. And the experience of Edwards during those few years, and among many other ministers in many other churches, was a clear reminder of that great work of God with which the New Testament church was established, that event we now simply call Pentecost. I have noted the importance of Pentecost frequently in these months now that we have been studying the book of Acts, verses such as,

Acts 2:40 "And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation."
41 Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them."

Acts 2:46 “So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

I have emphasized in recent weeks the invitation of the gospel preaching which Luke has recorded in this book of Acts, primarily thus far the preaching of Peter, particularly,

Acts 2:8 “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

In more recent weeks we studied the miraculous healing in Acts 3, with Peter’s clarity in identifying the author not only of the miracle itself but the author of life, namely God. So two weeks ago we studied,

Acts 3:13 “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. 14 But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, 15 and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses. 16 And His name, through faith in His name, has made this man strong, whom you see and know. Yes, the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.”

This morning we come to the concluding application of Peter’s sermon, focused upon,

v.19 “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”

Let’s begin, however, with verse 17,

I. THE REVELATION OF GOD’S GRACE TO UNBELIEVERS.

I chose to look at verse 17 in the context of God’s grace, noting the warning he has just proclaimed in,

v.13 “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. 14 But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, 15 and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses.”

Clearly he is emphasizing the guilt of the people of the nation of Israel, in having Jesus put to death! The same emphasis is found in,

Acts 2:2 “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know— 23 Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death.”

And yet, in the shift of verse 17, Peter emphasizes that their sin is not unforgivable. It’s not unpardonable. Thus his words are not a mere condemnation, nor a final judgment from which their is no escape. And the reason Peter identifies is their ignorance. Ignorance is no excuse for sin, and Peter certainly doesn’t intent it to be so, but he does proclaim,

A. Grace to recognize the ignorance of unbelievers.

They are without excuse, to be sure, but they are not without hope. That’s what grace is all about. Grace focuses upon the guilt of a person, and, in that context, chooses to grant relief from

the appropriate judgment which is deserved, offering instead a gift. Grace.

Eph. 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

Rom. 3:23 “...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Peter is emphasizing that grace here, that though there is great guilt, the greatest of all guilt actually, despite that guilt he does not proclaim to them the eternal condemnation of the judgment of God. He proclaims to them the grace of God. He acknowledges their ignorance,

v.17 “Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers.”

But he doesn't leave them in their ignorance. Rather, Peter's words show to us...

B. Grace to reveal the solution to ignorance in Jesus.

So that they won't remain ignorant! So Peter tells them about Jesus.

v.18 “But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled.”

Let me tell you about Jesus! That's Peter's message. And that is my message today as well. And though he would have said it in a much more formal and with far more biblically rich references, Jonathan Edwards would have said the same message to the people of Northampton during the Great Awakening—Let me tell you about Jesus.

Notice Peter's emphasis, that Jesus is not new. His identify isn't new and his origin isn't recent. In fact, verse 18, “God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer.” In other words, the Old Testament prophets revealed Jesus as well. God foretold Jesus in the Old Testament, through those prophets in whose mouths God has put his own words. So Peter says this in his first epistle,

1 Peter 1:10 “Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, 11 searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.”

So the key to understanding the Old Testament is to understand that you will find Jesus there...everywhere! God has foretold Jesus through the mouths of the Old Testament prophets. Peter goes on in our text this morning,

v.20 “...and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before.”

Again, that emphasis. Jesus was preached before, before his incarnation as a man. In fact, Peter refers to eternity past before the creation of the world, continuing to speak of Jesus,

v.21 “...whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.”

Don't ever think that the Old Testament presents of God of wrath while the New Testament presents a God of grace, for the grace of God in Jesus was spoken and revealed by God “by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.”

And so, with that revelation of grace to unbelievers, we see,

II. THE CALL OF THE GOSPEL TO UNBELIEVERS.

And it is, first and foremost,

A. A call to faith in Jesus.

Peter is telling us a lot about Jesus, and “faith” here means believing the content of what is being revealed. Faith is believing Jesus, what God says about him and what he has done. And at this point in the sermon, Peter doesn’t elaborate, he just refers to the work of Jesus very plainly, verse 18, “that Jesus would suffer.” That’s what the Old Testament prophets foretold, that Jesus would suffer. We know, of course, what that means. He would suffer for our sins. He would suffer to satisfy the demands of God’s justice required as the curse for our sins. And never is that plainer in the words of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah.

Is. 53:3 “He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. 4 Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

Christ died for our sins. That’s the gospel, the gospel told beforehand to the prophets. And the call of the gospel is to believe that. To receive that. To accept that gift for yourself, that Jesus suffered for you. For as we read in verse 20, God sent Jesus Christ. He sent him into the world, to live as a man. To die in the full experience of his humanity.

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. 17 For God did not send His Son into the

world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

So believe on him today, that you might be saved! No matter what your sin, no matter how guilty you are. The promise of the gospel removes the curse of condemnation. And note the reference in verse 21 to “the times of restoration of all things.” I believe that restoration is the restoration of fellowship between God and man, the removal of the curse due to man because of sin. “The times of restoration of all things” refers to the fullness and the completion of God’s work of salvation, which is the completion of our eternal salvation. It is the completion of our redemption. “The times of restoration of all things” refers ultimately to the time of our own resurrection from the dead at the last day. And so we read,

1 Cor. 15:20 “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming. 24 Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. 26 The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.”

That is “the times of restoration of all things.” And notice how Peter invites us to partake of that resurrection, that redemption. It is,

B. The call of repentance.

Plain and simple. As direct as it could possibly be.

v.19 “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”

Let's look closely at that verse, beginning with repentance. Repentance means to confess before God that you are guilty, that you have sinned. To agree that you deserve his judgment upon your sin. And repentance means to turn away from sin, with grief and hatred of that sin.

Remember Peter's answer to that marvelous question in Acts 2:37, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

Acts 2:38 "Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Faith in Jesus, believing that he died for yours, is inseparably connected with repentance—confessing and turning from those sins. Repentance means to turn away from those sins, to turn from them, with what Paul calls in 2 Corinthians 7, "godly sorrow."

2 Cor. 7:10 "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. 11 For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter."

So repent of your sins. That is the call of the gospel. That is the faithful application of biblical preaching. It's not alright to continue on in your sin. It's not alright to claim to believe in Jesus on the one hand, while on the other hand you refuse to turn away from your sin. You cannot have it both ways. The call of repentance is absolutely necessary as the foundation for,

C. The promise of conversion.

v.9 "Repent therefore and be converted."

The ESV translates "turn back," and I think "converted" is the better translation because it refers to that toward which you turn. You turn away from sin, that's repentance. And you turn toward Jesus. That's conversion. That's salvation. That's life!

It's the same word James uses in,

James 5:19 "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

The call of the gospel is to bring back a sinner from his wandering, to bring him back to Jesus! So "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." There is,

D. The blessing of forgiveness.

There is the heart of the whole matter of salvation, "that your sins may be blotted out." Again,

Acts 2:38 "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins."

Remember also Jesus' words when he instituted the Lord's Supper.

Mat. 26:28 "For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

I hope this all fits together for you, that you understand and believe all of this, together. For this is the call of the gospel, that you confess and repent of your sins, that you trust and believe in Jesus who died for your sins. And his death was necessary, absolutely necessary, because the wages of sin is death. The condemnation of sin is death. The curse of sin is death. And Jesus suffered that death for you, for you who believe and trust in him. The great biblical principle of blood is so appropriate to

emphasize here, for blood represents death, and in the Old Testament, before Jesus, there was the blood of animals shed upon Jewish altars. And all of that blood, all of those sacrifices, show us Jesus!

Heb. 9:18 “Therefore not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood. 19 For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, 20 saying, “This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you.” 21 Then likewise he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry. 22 And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission.”

And then we read,

Heb. 9:26 “...but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. 27 And as 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.”

But there is one more point to be made. All of this is more than a mere judicial or forensic transaction. It's more than just what takes place in a courtroom. That courtroom drama is crucial, and vital. The forensic nature of our salvation is the very heart of the gospel, that we are declared “not guilty” by the judge, that we are justified, that we are accepted as righteous in his sight, that our sins are forgiven. But beloved, there is one more step in this glorious process that Peter identifies in verse 19.

E. Times of refreshing.

v.19 “...so that times of refreshing may come from the

presence of the Lord.”

Let me tell you what is refreshing. It is the awareness, the consciousness, that your sins are blotted out! Your sins! Those sins you confessed. Those sins you turned away from in repentance, and yet those sins that still tempt you and afflict you. Those sins that cause you to feel guilty, because you are, you have sinned against God. You have not measured up. You have offended God by violating his laws. And here, beloved, here is the refreshment. It is the awareness and the confidence that God has removed those sins from you.

Ps. 103:12 “As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

This is the refreshment, as David expresses it in,

Ps. 32:1 “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered. 2 Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit. 3 When I kept silent, my bones grew old Through my groaning all the day long. 4 For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. 5 I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” And You forgave the iniquity of my sin.”

Sin is so deceptive, because sin tempts you and says to you, “do this and you will be happy.” Do this and you will have pleasure. Do this and you will enjoy it. As Satan so successfully tempted Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden,

Gen. 3:6 “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.”

But it wasn't good, it wasn't pleasant, it wasn't desirable. Sin never does. It only brings guilt.

Gen.3:7 "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings."

But the truth of the gospel is this, that turning from sin in repentance, trusting in Jesus with faith, brings the forgiveness of sin. And that, beloved, that awareness of forgiveness, that confidence of forgiveness, is what brings about "times of refreshing...from the presence of the Lord." So when you are tempted by sin, and you will be, you are, when you are tempted to sin, remember this, that sin will never bring "times of refreshing." But faith and repentance will!

So let me preach and proclaim this great gospel just as clearly and plainly as the Apostle Peter, using his own words,

v.19 "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, 20 and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, 21 whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began."