

THOSE WHO WERE LOST ON PENTECOST

By Dub McClish

Introduction

No one can determine the exact number of people who were in Jerusalem for the Pentecost feast of Acts 2, but the crowds must have greatly taxed the city's capacity. Luke states that men were there "from every nation under heaven," and then names fifteen nations from which they had come (vv. 5, 9–11). Uninspired historians used such terms as "an immense multitude," "prodigious crowds," and "vast throngs" to describe the multitude that attended the three obligatory feast days, including Pentecost, in the first century.

Out of this number, we know that about three thousand heard, believed, and obeyed the Gospel (v. 41). Jesus taught that "many" will enter and travel the "broad way" that leads to destruction, while only "few" will enter and travel the "straitened way" that leads to life (Mat. 7:13–14). He also said that "many are called, but few chosen" (22:14). These statements reflect the fact that generally only a small percentage of any crowd made up of the general public that hears the Gospel will respond in faith and obedience. When one applies this principle to the events of Pentecost he must conclude that the number of those who heard Peter and refused the Gospel on that great day was greater—perhaps by several times—than the three thousand who "received his word" and were baptized (Acts 2:41).

Innumerable sermons have been preached about those who were saved on Pentecost. Lamentably, some who still masquerade as "Gospel preachers" imagine that they are too learned and sophisticated to preach such fundamental and plain messages anymore. Those who are faithful to the Christ, will not cease to do so. Only when sinful men "outgrow" their need to hear what the Savior requires of them to be cleansed of their sins by His blood and added to His church will we no longer need to preach on Acts 2.

If Acts 2 tells us the conditions upon which sinners were and are saved (as it certainly does), it also, by implication, tells us why some remained in their lost condition after the events of that historic occasion. It is quite likely that many folk in that crowd who heard the apostles preach had their own ideas about salvation, just as millions do now. The requirements Peter stated (repent and be baptized unto remission of sins) were in unequivocal terms, rooted in the authority of Jesus Christ (v. 38). None of those who refused to hearken to the Gospel message of that day were saved from their sins. The Lord's terms of pardon have not changed; so none today, as then, who rebel at these terms can be saved if they die in that rebellion. Perhaps it will

be instructive to consider some of those who were lost on Pentecost, and who, likewise, are lost today for the same reasons.

“Our Belief in Christ Is Sufficient to Save Us”

The record states of the multitude who heard the message about the crucified, resurrected Christ: “Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brethren, what shall we do?” (v. 37). This question interrupted the sermon, which Peter soon resumed with “many other words” (v. 40). The specific statement to which they responded was the conclusion he drew in verse 36: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly, that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified.” Up to this point, they seem to have been gradually coming to acceptance of the powerful evidences presented (miraculous phenomena, eye-witness testimony of the resurrection, and prophetic fulfillment). To finally accept the Truth of Jesus’ identity forced them to face the awful burden of their guilt for His crucifixion.

The Truth that had “pricked” their hearts made them so miserable with guilt that they could no longer contain themselves. They seem almost to have exploded with the question, “Brethren, what shall we do?” They perhaps despaired that there was anything they **could** do to be forgiven of this most heinous (and, ironic) of all crimes—the murder of the only One who could save them.

The question itself was a tacit confession of their belief in Jesus as the Christ, for they would never have asked it otherwise. To the cry of these believers, “What shall we do?” Peter’s answer was immediate and unambiguous: “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (v. 38). There **was** a remedy for their terrible sin. The positive, clarion response to their question must have filled their hearts with great joy and relief. It was good news—Gospel—indeed! We can only imagine the relief that swept over them as they heard the wonderful words of Peter’s reply.

Verse 41 tells us that about three thousand in the throng received and obeyed the Word that day, being baptized. What of those who believed and asked what to do, but who refused or neglected to repent and be baptized, as the three thousand did? Did they leave this occasion saved or lost? Practically every present-day denominational preacher (including the likes of Billy Graham, Charles Swindoll, and Max Lucado) would pronounce them saved without batting an eye and would call anyone who says otherwise a “legalist” if not worse. Had they been present on the Pentecost occasion, they would have answered as follows:

You need do nothing. You obviously already believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Find a church you like and join it. Be baptized if you wish, but not in order to be saved. The Lord saved you the moment you believed.

Poor old Peter! He was merely an inspired apostle. He knew no better than to tell them that their mere belief would not save them, but that they must repent and be baptized to be cleansed from their sins. His inspired answer to their question should have prevented the foolish and damnable salvation-by-faith-alone doctrine from ever being conceived, much less proliferated.

Those who stopped at the point of faith alone on Pentecost went home lost. Mere belief has no more power to save today than it did then. Those baptizophobic false teachers who preach faith-only salvation are blind leaders headed for the eternal “ditch” themselves, and they are taking their followers with them by the millions (Mat. 15:14).

“God Is too Good to Punish People Eternally”

There were likely some Sadducees in the great crowd on Pentecost. These were the modernistic Jews of the first century who professed belief in Jehovah but held that “there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit” (Acts 23:8). (As a little boy once said of them, “That’s why they’re sad, you see.”) They denied the concept of immortality, apparently believing that the only punishment for one’s sins would be exacted in this life. They certainly were too “sophisticated” to believe in Hell, a place of eternal torment for sinners. It is not at all difficult to imagine these elitist skeptics standing at the fringes of the Pentecost crowd, ridiculing the message of Peter and the way he was “manipulating” the emotions of the naïve and ignorant masses: “Look at those poor fools: drinking in this silly stuff about being ‘lost’ and needing to be ‘saved.’ The God that I worship is too good to create a place where He will torment sinners forever.”

Modern counterparts of the Sadducees are legion. They do not believe in Hell, or if they profess to do so, they know of no one who is going there. Had they been in Peter’s place on Pentecost, they would have answered the crowd: “Don’t worry about crucifying the Son of God. God understands, and He will say ‘Well done’ without regard to what you believe or how you behave. Just go on ‘living it up.’ He is too gracious and good to torment anyone in Hell.”

Contrariwise, Peter preached so as to convince the people on Pentecost that what they had done would cause them to be lost—eternally and irremediably. The crowd obviously understood this, and a large number believed it. The gist of their question was: “What must we do to escape the torment of eternal Hell fire?” Peter’s answer offered but one remedy for the certain doom they faced: obedience to the commands to repent and be baptized in order to be

forgiven of their sins, the wages of which would be eternal separation from God in Hell (Rom. 6:23). These commands came from the very One Whom in whose crucifixion they had had a part fifty days before. Those on Pentecost who believed God is too “good” to punish anyone in Hell went home lost, and if they did not later obey the Gospel, they will at The Judgment learn that, in spite of the goodness of God, they chose their own eternal doom. Those today who thus reason about sin, Hell, and the grace of God, thereby rejecting the Gospel, will be keeping them company in eternity. In the first or the twenty-first century, those who “obey not the gospel...shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 The. 1:8–9).

“Keeping the Ten Commandments and Living a Good Moral Life Will Save Us”

All of those who heard (except perhaps some proselytes and the few Roman soldiers who may have been on hand for crowd control) had a fifteen-century heritage of accountability to Moses’ law. Six of the Ten Commandments (the foundation of the Mosaic system) were moral laws. The Pharisees present might especially have thought they did not need to do more than they were doing, for, generally, they were consumed with self-righteousness (Luke 18:10–12). Likely, many of those listening to the apostles on Pentecost thought they were good enough to be saved by their own “goodness.” All such would surely have ridiculed the requirements for salvation Peter iterated.

Those aforementioned folk have multiplied millions of modern counterparts. Most of these are Gentiles (to whom Moses’ law never applied in the first place) who largely think of the Decalogue only in terms of its moral edicts. Unquestionably, it is important, yea necessary, to live a morally pure life if one would be saved (Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:14–16; et al.). However, all men—Jews and Gentiles alike—are in the same sad lost condition today without Christ as were those on Pentecost, regardless of their moral goodness.

The law of Moses, with its moral strictures and sacrificial system, though God-given, was insufficient to save even those to whom it was given (the Jews alone). It was not given to save, but to prepare for the coming of the Savior (Gal. 3:21–27). It was “impossible that the blood of bulls and goats [the best atonement the law had to offer] should take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). Only the Christ, as the “Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world” could—and did—offer “one sacrifice for sins for ever” (John 1:29; Heb. 10:12). Peter’s declaration on Pentecost that “everyone of you” must repent and be baptized in order to receive remission of sins reveals the means of appropriating the forgiveness available through the perfect sacrifice (John 14:6;

Acts 4:12). If one can be saved on the basis of his own moral goodness, there was no need for Christ ever leave Heaven, much die the awful death He died.

Either one can or he cannot be saved merely on the grounds of his own goodness. Those on Pentecost who believed they could thus be saved went home lost, if Peter's words on that occasion have any meaning whatsoever. The modern moralist who is depending on his own goodness to save him is likewise in for a sad disappointment at The Judgment: Salvation is "not by works done in righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy..., through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Tit. 3:5).

"We Think the Answer Is too Dogmatic and Exclusive"

It is not difficult to picture many of the Jews, especially the self-righteous Pharisees and elitist Sadducees, reasoning that Peter's words were far too dogmatic and exclusive. "Why, this man's words even exclude **us** from being right with God! How dare he be so dogmatic." Any who thus reasoned were correct in at least one respect: The conditions of pardon Peter issued on Pentecost were both dogmatic and exclusive. Men often still refuse to tolerate Biblical Truth on these same grounds (because they are so "tolerant," you see). Several years ago a denominational preacher accused me of "teaching an exclusive way of salvation," which I took as a compliment. (Is this not what Peter did?) This same pitiful whine has been issuing forth from many in the church for a few decades now, intimidating some from preaching like Peter. These whiners are embarrassed to hear Gospel preachers dare to tell sinners they will be lost if they do not obey the Gospel plan of salvation. They counsel: "Don't be so dogmatic and exclusivistic. You might offend my neighbors."

Peter's words were **dogmatic** in that he stated them as unquestionably right. They were **exclusive** because they excluded from salvation all who rejected them. Peter's answer was hardly "politically correct" by modern liberal standards, but (which matters far more) it was theologically and religiously correct—revealed by the Holy Spirit. Peter's words were the Truth, and in its very nature, truth in any field of thought is dogmatic and exclusive. To say that the Truth is "dogmatic" does not make it any less truthful. The dogmatism and exclusiveness of Peter's response are fully in keeping with Jesus' claim that the way to life is "straitened" and is entered by a "narrow gate" (Mat. 7:13–14).

Those who keep uttering the vain banality, "One doctrine is as good as another, and it makes no difference what one believes," would do well to test their words by Peter's statement. He did not preface his command by saying, "Here is one possible solution," "If it is convenient," "Some of you might want to consider," or even "Most of you should." Rather than merely making

polite suggestion, he boldly commanded: “Repent ye, and be baptized **every one of you**...,” clearly leaving them with the conclusion that this was the **only** way they could receive forgiveness of their sins.

Those on Pentecost who were offended by Peter’s dogmatic and exclusive terminology went home with one more sin on them than when they arrived—the sin of rejecting the Son of God by rejecting His Word (John 12:48). Those in our time who thus react to the plain proclamation of the Gospel of Christ are likewise without hope.

“We Think We Will Wait Awhile”

Perhaps every gathering will have its share of procrastinators. In a crowd as large as the one on Pentecost, there may have been many of this disposition. Like Governor Felix said to Paul, perhaps they thought it was not a “convenient season” to act on Peter’s words (Acts 24:25). Some may have sincerely intended later to give further consideration to their spiritual needs, and some may have actually done so (though we have no specific record of such). Likely, most of them, human nature being what it is, instead of coming nearer to obeying the Gospel, gave it less and less consideration. One thing is certain, whether or not any of the Pentecost procrastinators had an additional opportunity or took advantage of it, when they left the assembly on that day, they left lost.

Procrastination is still a great destroyer of souls. Those “good intentions” so often simply represent the pavement to Hell. The devil does not get very excited about people who become convinced that they are lost and that they must obey the Gospel to be saved. He does not even become concerned if they have sincere intentions of doing so—as long as they are not in a hurry to follow through. Many seem not to understand that knowing what to do to be saved and not doing it only compounds the guilt of sin: “To him therefore that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (Jam. 4:17). Because of this tendency to procrastinate, Peter used “many other words,” exhorting them not to let the moment pass: “Save yourselves from this crooked generation” (Acts 2:40). He knew that those who left that occasion in disobedience would likely never respond and would thus be lost. It remains so today.

Conclusion

We learn much from the Gospel sermon Peter preached on Pentecost, and from the response to it. His answer to those who cried out, “What shall we do?” are clear, plain, and unambiguous. Should the whole world come to despise them, those yet faithful to the Christ who authorized them must never cease to preach them and urge men to submit to them. There is no salvation apart from them.

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