

Acts

Acts 2:38-47 - The opening up of a whole new world

In Acts Chapters 1 and 2 it's made clear that in Jesus' absence the Holy Spirit is continuing Jesus' ministry through Jesus' apostles, but in a new way and with new power that will enable Jesus' message about the kingdom of God to go worldwide.

And the evidence to prove it began with a bang just over a week after Jesus was taken up into heaven, when the Spirit blew in with a gale force wind and lightning like fire, enabling the apostles to speak about "the wonders of God" to the Jews gathered at the temple in their many different dialects and languages. But the real bombshell that shook the Jews up most of all was hearing that they'd killed their Messiah, in whom they'd rested all their hopes of a new and wonderful age of restoring Israel back to its glory days. And this has them asking in desperation, "So now what do we do?" (Acts 2:37).

Would there be no reign of God at all now? Was it all over, with no future left for them? But more to the point, had they blown their chances at ever being God's people again? Had they really done themselves in this time, so that everything promised to them in their Scriptures was now null and void?

But in Acts 2:21 Peter had quoted Joel 2:32, that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" - so that promise still existed and had to be fulfilled, and not only for the Jews but also beyond their Jewish borders to "everyone." There was a lot more yet to come, then, wasn't there? But it was all very new too, though, that anyone calling on Jesus to restore them personally would get the help they needed. So, yes, there was a future, but it wasn't national glory. It was something far more personal.

Because it was to these desperate Jews that Peter replied in Acts 2:38, "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven." This wasn't a formula for all Christians in the future, this was meant for those Jews and "men of Israel" (verse 22), which Peter also made clear when he told them, "YOUR sins are forgiven." In other words, before this message was going to the world, the Spirit was making sure those Jews knew THEIR sins had been forgiven first, including the dreadful sin of killing their Messiah (verse 36). They were each being given a fresh start personally, with every sin in their personal past put behind them.

They would be the **first people**, therefore, to experience what this new era of Jesus' ministry was opening up. Anyone from now on could personally call on the name of the Lord (Acts 2:21), or in the name of Jesus Christ (verse 38), and be given a fresh start when it dawned on them too that the Messiah had died to forgive their sins. But the Jews especially needed reassurance that **THEIR** sins, including killing their Messiah, had been forgiven, which baptism would do for them. Baptism was their Jewish way of knowing their sins had been washed away, made clear by John the Baptist earlier.

Verse 38 does NOT mean they were forgiven IF they repented and were baptized. It was simply, "Get the point, folks, that because of Jesus whatever sins you committed in the past, known or unknown (as it was in the case of the Jews not knowing they'd killed their Messiah), are totally forgiven."

And what a refreshing and marvellous surprise that was, that for nothing more than accepting their need for forgiveness, and believing that need had been met by Jesus, they'd been washed totally clean. And in the case of those Jews it meant their connection with God had not been lost too, so they still had a future, despite what they'd done. And they no longer had to worry about losing out on being restored either, because in believing they'd been forgiven the process of restoring them personally would now begin.

The one question remaining, though, was "What did their future hold now?" They'd been forgiven and received a fresh start, which was wonderful, but what for? And we could ask the same question too, couldn't we? After we realize our deep need for forgiveness for how we too treated Jesus with such disinterest and disdain, but believed forgiveness was ours because of Jesus, it was wonderful having all our guilt and shame removed, but now what? What was supposed to happen next?

Well, it's here in Acts that we find out **what else** this new era in Jesus' ministry opened up and where it was leading, because Peter has yet to finish verse 38 with another surprise: that the Jews, having accepted that their sin of killing the Messiah had been forgiven (along with all their other sins), now got to "**receive the gift of the Holy Spirit**" as well.

It was theirs - as a gift. And not just a gift for them either, because in **verse 39** it was also a gift meant for their children too, and "for all who are far off" (probably referring to the Gentiles), "and for all whom the Lord our God will call." So whatever this gift of the Holy Spirit turned out to be, it was being opened up in a big way to all sorts of people.

Which was all very intriguing, but **what was this gift of the Holy Spirit for?** Why did anyone actually **NEED** it? What did the Spirit do?

Well, again, the Holy Spirit comes to our aid as the great EXPLAINER, because the main thrust of the “many words of warning” and “pleading” by Peter to the Jews in **verse 40**, is that “Now you’ve got the Spirit, folks, you can ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’”

So this was what the Jews back then needed the Spirit for: it was **first meant for them** to help THEM save themselves from the corrupt generation THEY were living in. But what was so corrupting about their generation? Well, that was made abundantly clear through all four gospels, that the Jewish religious leaders, who should have known better, had rejected and resisted Jesus, and spread so much distrust and false information about him that the Jewish nation as a whole had turned against him - despite all the marvellous miracles he’d done to conclusively prove he was the Messiah. So, how much more corrupt could they get than that?

It was clear evidence that **without** the gift of the Holy Spirit the Jews had totally missed the purpose of Jesus’ coming, totally missed the prophecies in their scriptures that clearly identified who Jesus was, and worst of all they’d totally missed the need clearly mentioned in Scripture that Jesus would suffer and die to forgive their sin. And they were the people God had specifically chosen and given the scriptures to as well, to enable them to know who Jesus was and that he’d come to die for the forgiveness of human sin.

The Jews, therefore, were in desperate need of being released from their ignorance and resistance, but with power beyond their own, because resistance to Jesus was engrained in the minds of their generation, which had so corrupted their minds they couldn’t even see their need for forgiveness.

And the same goes for our generation too, right? Ask a person today if they need forgiveness and what would they say? Forgiveness? Forgiveness for what, pray tell? And if you replied, “Forgiveness for your sins being the cause of Jesus being crucified,” and what would their response be to that?

But the good news is, that many of those Jews in the book of Acts **did** respond, “about three thousand” of them in one go (Acts 2:41), to show that this is what the new era of Jesus’ ministry led by the Holy Spirit is opening up and making possible. It was meant for those Jews in Acts first, yes, but the good news includes the promise (verse 39) that anyone who calls on God for forgiveness - believing it’s theirs because of Jesus - receives it.

And what follows after that is **more release for our minds** from the corruption of our generation, in the form of a total change of heart and focus. For the Jews back then it was “devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer,” **Act 2:42**.

They were very fortunate, of course, in having the apostles right there with them - doing “many wonders and miraculous signs” too (verse 43). The Jews also had thousands of kindred spirits all of a sudden to mix and eat with, all of whom clearly appreciated what God had opened up to them, and they expressed it in their typical Jewish way of prayers.

It’s a lovely illustration of the Holy Spirit making them a witness **their** way, and in their Jewish terms, to what Jesus’ death and forgiveness make possible. There’s no formula here in verse 42 for how we Christians should be reacting too, but it does show **the noticeable difference** it made in those Jews when they knew that total forgiveness of all their sins had been sealed forever in Jesus’ death. And that’s what made them a visible witness to Jesus, just as it makes us visible witnesses to Jesus when we believe we’re forgiven.

This is the “good newsy” part of the gospel we can all experience, in how the Holy Spirit makes us into effective witnesses to Jesus when we too believe we’ve been totally forgiven. The difference in us is visible. For me it’s been the wonderful release of being able to forgive others, and not be eaten up with bitterness when other people treat me badly.

For other people it may be release from the addictive idols of the culture, like one’s self-image and wanting people’s admiration, and from the horrible realization that you’ve wasted most of your life on useless things. But knowing you’re forgiven enables you to press on and not be buried in despondency. This is all so **personal**, in the dramatic effect forgiveness has on us personally to make a witness to Jesus possible and real in our lives too.

The Jews in Acts, meanwhile, experienced a wonderful new connection with God and their fellow Jews. They were “together and had everything in common,” **verse 44**, to the point of happily selling their possessions to provide for those in need. And again, this isn’t a formula or a “must do” for Christians in all ages; it’s simply how those Jews reacted with their new gift of the Spirit. Every day they headed off to the temple together and then met in homes for meals and animated discussion (46). And note how their appreciation for what God had done spilled over **into a favourable witness to others** too (47).

So here in Acts 2 we see the Holy Spirit **opening up a whole new world** to those shell shocked Jews when they realized they’d been forgiven.