

Last Revised: 2 September 2010

ACTS 2:38-39: PETER'S PENTECOST APPEAL

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Acts 2:38-39

And Peter said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself."

Acts 2:38-39 is a very important text. It is situated at the beginning of the Gospel preaching of the New Testament and is often used in defence of infant baptism. It certainly instructs us as to the core of what New Testament preaching ought to be. And yet we ought not to forget that this text stands in a certain context. It is equally important that we do not rip it out of that context.

The Appeal

The Holy Spirit had descended upon the apostles on the day of Pentecost. The sound of the rushing wind had attracted a considerable group of bystanders and their amazement was complete when they heard these men from Galilee speaking all manner of languages. Peter explains to the crowd what had happened. It was the fulfilment of prophecy and proof that the living Jesus, whom the Jews of the city had given to the Romans to be crucified, had taken his position at the right hand of God the Father. This was a shock to the crowd, who ask Peter what they should now do! They have been convicted of murdering the Messiah, God's Son.

Peter comes to his audience both with a command and a promise: "Repent!"—the command. And the promise? He mentions this in verse 39: "For the promise is for you and your children." What precisely this promise holds we shall see a little later. Let us first pay some attention to the command.

"Repent!," says Peter. We may ask the question who Peter is calling to repent? From the context it is clear that he is speaking to Jews. They were people from all over the world, currently living in Jerusalem. Consider Acts 2:5. "Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven." These nations are summarised in verses 10 and 11. But why did Jews have to repent? The charge Peter made against them was crystal clear. In verse 36 he speaks of "this Jesus whom you crucified." The Jews had rejected Jesus, and yet at this feast of Pentecost there was evidence that He was still alive! Tongues as of fire had descended upon the apostles, and everyone had heard the wonder of their speaking in tongues (= languages). This was the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy.

The Jews who were present, at least 3000 of them, were deeply smitten in their hearts. They had only just realised that they had participated in the crucifixion of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ—someone who was now ruling from His seat in heaven. This must have been a very frightening moment for them! What could they now expect? The psalms are full of statements showing how the Messiah will avenge Himself upon his enemies. And Peter was not afraid to refer to such psalms in his sermon. In verses 34-35 he quotes Ps. 2 ...

For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: 'THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD,' SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE THINE ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR THY FEET.'

These Jews realised now that they had become the enemies of God. “What now? What must we do to be saved?” they ask Peter. It was not just any sin that they had committed.

Then come Peter’s amazing words, words of comfort, full of the grace of the almighty, holy God whom they had so insulted. “Repent, and let each of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” Yes, in the name of the person whom they had helped to kill, ... on His name God would grant forgiveness of sins. There is a way back to God. Reconciliation with God is possible, despite the extent of their sin. That is the grace of our God. Even those who had participated in Jesus’ death may be washed of their sins in Christ’s blood. God does not cherish a human kind of revenge. And that is a great comfort to us. No sin is so great that it cannot be covered by God’s grace and by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. But there is a condition. Forgiveness is not doled out randomly. God is righteous and He expects repentance. But also that was a gift of grace in the ears of the Jews. God wishes to accept our repentance! Praise be His name!

Not everything is stated in verse 37. Peter does not say how baptism symbolises the forgiveness of sins, nor what precisely the blood of Jesus has to do with this forgiveness. We know the answers to these questions from the rest of the New Testament. And we must suppose that Peter also explained this to the Jews. It is not for nothing that we are told in verse 40 that Peter “with many other words solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them.”

We are, however, told that Peter spoke to them of God’s promise. V.39: “For you is the promise and for your children.”

The Promise

At this point we need to focus closely on what the text says. There are many who state that this promise must be the promise of the Holy Spirit. And it may seem, at first sight, that this is so. What does Peter say? “And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children.” And yet it is clearly not the intention of the apostle to say that the promise is this special gift of the Holy Spirit.

In order to make this clear I must first say something about the reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then I will come back to the question of just what this promise is in verse 39.

The first thing we need to say is that this gift of the Holy Spirit cannot be the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in one’s heart. For that would be completely the wrong order of things. Repent, be baptised ... and only then receive the Holy Spirit in your heart? That cannot be correct. We learn very clearly in the New Testament that true faith, true conversion, is something that the Holy Spirit Himself works in our hearts. If I know for myself that I truly believe, then I may conclude that the Holy Spirit is in my heart. If I repent of my sin, then that is evidence that I already have the Holy Spirit! Peter does not speak here about receiving the Holy Spirit, but about receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. Within the context of Pentecost he cannot mean anything else than the special gifts of the Spirit, especially, the ability to speak in tongues. That is the gift which these Jews will receive if they repent and allow themselves to be baptised.

They had already seen this special gift on that first day of Pentecost, but none of them had received this gift themselves. No, they had heard the apostles using this gift. It was the group of apostles who first received the gift of tongues from heaven at Pentecost, no one else. All those Jews and proselytes from all over the world heard the apostles speaking in tongues. We read in verses 6-8:

And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were bewildered, because they were each one hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and marvelled, saying, “Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?”

“But now,” says Peter, “if you repent and allow yourselves to be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins, you will also receive the special gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Yes, even they could speak in tongues as proof of the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. We learn how this came about further on in the book of Acts. Take, for example, chapter 8:14-19 which shows us how the apostles went around granting the gift of the Holy Spirit to others by laying their hands on the heads of the recipients. Luke specifically states (v.18):

... the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands

See also chapter 19 where the apostle Paul came across several people who had never been baptised in the name of Jesus. Let's see how that went:

And it came about that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper country came to Ephesus, and found some disciples, and he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said to him, “No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.” And he said, “Into what then were you baptised?” And they said, “Into John’s baptism.” And Paul said, “John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” And when they heard this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying.

And that is surely how it happened. “Repent, be baptised, and then you will receive the special gift of the Holy Spirit (i.e., by the laying on of the hands of the apostles).”

But what then is the great promise of which Peter speaks in verse 39? That Peter cannot be referring to the reception of the special gift of the Spirit is clear from the fact that this promise is for everyone—even descendants who are far off. The special gift of the Spirit could only be distributed by the apostles. When they died, the special gift of the Spirit died out with them. But Peter makes it clear by his own words that he is not referring to the special gifts of the Spirit. For, although it is not very clear in translation, he refers back to the words of the prophet Joel. The great promise is the promise of the prophet Joel, the promise of salvation, Acts 2:21 ...

And it shall be, that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

καὶ ἔσται πᾶς ὃς ἐὰν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου σωθήσεται.

In the prophecy of Joel 2:32 we can read the rest of that verse. There it reads:

And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be delivered; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be those who escape, as the LORD has said, even among the survivors whom the LORD calls.

καὶ ἔσται πᾶς, ὃς ἂν ἐπικαλέσῃται τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου, σωθήσεται· ὅτι ἐν τῷ ὄρει Σιών καὶ ἐν Ἱερουσαλήμ ἔσται ἀνασωζόμενος, καθότι εἶπεν κύριος, καὶ εὐαγγελιζόμενοι, οὓς κύριος προσκέκληται.

It is clear that for Joel the promise concerns salvation/ deliverance. Now those last words of Joel “whom the Lord calls” are precisely the words which Peter refers to when he says: “The promise is for you and your children ... as many as the Lord our God shall call to himself” (ὕμῖν γὰρ ἔστιν ἡ ἐπαγγελία καὶ τοῖς τέκνοις ὑμῶν καὶ πᾶσιν τοῖς εἰς μακρὰν ὄσους ἂν προσκαλέσῃται κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν). In the Greek we see Peter adapting the words of Joel to his own sentence. It is unfortunate that this is not indicated in most translations. Peter uses the standard Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. And it is this promise of salvation from Joel that he is thinking

of here. This also agrees with what he has just said: “Repent, and let each of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” Forgiveness of sins is the essence of our salvation! This is the great theme of Peter’s admonition as verse 40 confirms:

And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation!”

ἑτέροις τε λόγοις πλείοσιν διεμαρτύρατο, καὶ παρεκάλει αὐτοὺς λέγων, Σώθητε ἀπὸ τῆς γενεᾶς τῆς σκολιᾶς ταύτης.

Peter was concerned with their salvation. And God gives this promise not only to the Jews who were present here, but also to their children and for all who are far off. There is forgiveness of sins for all.

But now we come up against an important problem. Peter says: “Repent, and let each of you be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins.” But most of us were already baptised as children! Is that not in contradiction to the order presented to us in this text?

Our text provides a clear sequence: first the command (“repent”) and then the symbol of the promise (baptism). Yet this sequence or order of events ought not to appear strange to us, for God had given the same order to Abraham. Abraham first had to believe. Only then did he receive the symbol of the promise, in his case circumcision. In Genesis 17 the Lord comes to Abraham with his covenant and the sign of circumcision. But years earlier, in chapter 15, God had recognised Abraham’s faith. There in chapter 15 God states that Abraham’s faith was reckoned for righteousness (15:6). In Romans 4 the apostle Paul discusses the significance of this fact.

What is my point? The order, first repent and then let yourself be baptised, is the normal order for people who are admitted into God’s covenant, both in the Old Testament and in the New. But if you have been admitted into God’s covenant and have received the covenant sign yourself, then God gives that same promise not only to you but also to your children. It is very significant that Peter also speaks of God’s promise of salvation in this way—and that to a group of Jews. The promise is for them and for their children. God had said the same to Abraham. Abraham knew that, because of this, the sign or symbol was not only given to him as an adult believer, but also to his children. The Jews who heard Peter all knew the history of God’s dealings with Abraham. The connection between salvation for the believer and the promise for both the believer and his children could not possibly have been missed.

It is true that this connection is only implied in the context here. Peter does not explain everything in our text, at least not for us. For the Jews he gave much extra explanation. We read about that in verse 40.¹ And we have the rest of the New Testament to fill in the details for us. Think of Col. 2:11-12 where Paul instructs us that baptism has come in the place of circumcision.² Think also of the rest of the book of Acts where time and again we are told that entire households were baptised.³ God’s grace is not only for adult believers, but also for their children. Praise Him for that great grace!

¹ That the covenant with Abraham formed a crucial aspect of Peter’s preaching is clear from Acts 3:25.

² Col. 2:11-12 “In Him (i.e., Christ) you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”

We see here that we as Christians are spiritually circumcised because we are baptised. For this reason we are rightly called “the circumcision,” and not the Jews! (see Phil. 3:2-3). Christians are the real Jews, not those who have Jewish blood (see Rev. 2:9). How come? In Rom. 11:17-24 Paul uses the image of a cultivated olive tree (the church from the beginning). When the Jews did not accept the Lord Jesus as the Messiah, they (branches from this tree) were chopped off. When Gentiles believed in the Lord Jesus they were cut out of the wild olive tree and engrafted into this cultivated olive tree. We are (as Christians) thus engrafted into the church and the covenant of the Old Testament. The Jews are still circumcised in the flesh, but that ought to be a sign of the circumcision of the heart, i.e. faith! That faith has been given to us! (for the circumcision of the heart, see Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. :4; 9:25-26; Rom. 2:28-29).

³ Cf. Acts 16:15, 33; 18:8.