

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Peter - the growth of a soul: The Evangelist - Acts 1:1-4:37 and 10:1-48

To have been in Jerusalem about the time Jesus was crucified must have been a memorable and moving experience. Crowds had gathered there from all over the then known world - Mesopotamia, Asia (our modern day Turkey), Egypt, Libya, and even Rome, that mighty seat of power. They had seen the city in turmoil as the man known as Jesus of Nazareth was crucified between two criminals. Probably they had heard the rumours of His being alive again, although others were saying that His disciples had stolen away His dead body. Many, having travelled so far, would have stayed on for a few weeks and made a holiday of it. Then, some seven weeks after those rumours of Jesus' resurrection first surfaced, the crowds had listened to Peter's preaching and no fewer than 3,000 of them had gladly received Peter's message, repenting of their sins and believing on the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour. They immediately demonstrated their belief by being baptised (see Acts 2:14-41).

Why did the preaching of Peter have such a powerful impact? How could a fisherman, "uneducated and untrained" as the authorities described him (Acts 4:13), be used by God in such a powerful way of blessing?

Pictures of icebergs floating in the sea may look very pretty but they do not immediately impress us with their great power. That's because what we see is only one-ninth of the total mass of the iceberg. Eight-ninths of it lies hidden under the sea and provides the iceberg with its awesome destructive power - sufficient to sink the supposedly unsinkable liner, the Titanic!

This morning's broadcast, entitled, 'Peter the evangelist' is the third in a series on 'Peter - the growth of a soul'. We have previously looked at 'Peter the believer' and 'Peter the disciple'. We need briefly to review some of the things we learned in those first two broadcasts, many of which were formative and vital influences in Peter's life, but carried out away from the public gaze, like the hidden eight-ninths of the iceberg. Only in this way will we appreciate Peter the evangelist, Peter the bringer of good news as the word 'evangelist' means. The good news Peter brought was, of course, the good news of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We learned, first of all, of Peter's introduction to the Saviour. His brother, Andrew, first brought Simon, as he was then called, to the Lord Jesus. Peter then became a committed follower of the Lord Jesus (see John 1:40-42). We read relatively little of Andrew in Scripture - he's one of the lesser known of the disciples, but how vital was his work that day in bringing his brother to Jesus! Without it, there would have been no Peter the evangelist. Today, very few know anything of William Holland. Yet he was the humble preacher to whom John Wesley was listening when, as he describes it, "he felt his heart strangely warmed within him". Through William Holland, John Wesley was converted. In turn, John Wesley's preaching was richly blessed of God to the salvation of many. It was that powerful effect upon the lives of the people of England that some historians believe saved this country from a fate similar to the French Revolution. No one can be an evangelist for the Lord Jesus without first coming to Jesus for salvation!

But we also learn of Peter's instruction from the Saviour. We read, "[Jesus] appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach" (Mark 3:14). Peter might be "uneducated and untrained" (Acts 4:13) but he had learned from Jesus in the quietness of the presence of Jesus. This it was that would ultimately make Peter's preaching so powerful. No one can be an evangelist for the Lord Jesus without first learning from Him in the secret of His presence, like the hidden eight-ninths of the iceberg.

Then we learn of Peter's commission from the Saviour. After the Lord Jesus was risen from the dead, three times over He commissioned Peter, "Feed My lambs ... Tend My sheep ... Feed My sheep" (see John 21:15-19). And this was after Peter had three times denied the Lord Jesus with oaths and curses! (Luke 22:54-62) John tells us, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Let no one be put off the work of evangelism because of some past sin or failure earlier in life!

It's time, now, to look at Peter the evangelist as we read about him in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. After the ascension of the Lord Jesus to heaven, Peter and the other Apostles returned to Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed them: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). That Holy Spirit came down on Peter and the other disciples some ten days later, on the Day of Pentecost, the day we know as Whit Sunday (Acts 2:1-4).

The indwelling Holy Spirit transformed Peter and the other disciples from being fearful and afraid into courageous and powerful witnesses for the Lord Jesus Christ. Each believer today receives the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit upon accepting Jesus Christ as Saviour. Paul tells us, "Christ ... in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance..." (Ephesians 1:12-14). The same power of the Holy Spirit that was available to Peter and the other disciples is available to each believer today!

It was in the power of that Holy Spirit that Peter, "standing up with the eleven" (Acts 2:14), preached to the people. We have time only to read part of his first sermon. It is found in Acts 2:14-41. Take time after this broadcast to read Acts 2. Peter did not mince his words: "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 - Him, being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up..." (Acts 2:22-24). He continues, "This Jesus God has raised up, of which we all are witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear ... Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ ... Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:36-38).

Peter's powerful preaching was blessed by God. So we read, "Then those who gladly received his word were baptised; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:41-42).

We saw earlier that the Lord's commission to Peter was, "Feed My lambs ... Feed My sheep" (John 21:15-19). Lambs need caring for and feeding if they are to grow up into sheep. Receiving Christ as Saviour is not an end, but a beginning. Peter would be careful to see that those who had begun with Christ would continue with Him in the fellowship of His people. As a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, you need that same fellowship of His people today!

Praise and prayer are as much a part of a believer's life as preaching. In Acts 3:1-10, we find Peter and John going to the temple to pray. (They had still to learn how completely the death of Jesus had delivered them from Judaism and its ritualism.) A man, lame from birth and now about 40 years old, was daily laid at the Beautiful gate of the temple - all to no avail. Through Peter and John, that lame man was made to walk! We read, "So he, leaping up, stood and walked and entered the temple with them - walking, leaping, and praising God"! (Acts 3:8). A crowd gather on seeing the miracle and, once more, Peter the evangelist speaks: "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this? Or why look so intently at us, as though by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? 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. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted unto you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses. And His name, through faith in His name, has made this man strong, whom you see and know ... Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:12-19).

Any lingering doubts about the completeness of Peter's restoration to the Lord are forever banished by his fearless denunciation, "...you denied the Holy One and the Just"! (Acts 3:14) The Jewish religious authorities were greatly disturbed by the preaching of Peter and John. The Sadducees, who did not believe in resurrection (Mark 12:18), were the leaders in this opposition. Peter and John were put in prison overnight. That could not stop the blessing of God following the preaching of His word. So, in Acts 4, we read, "However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand" (Acts 4:4).

The following morning, Peter and John are brought before the high priest and the Jewish rulers. Challenged as to the power by which they had healed the lame man, Peter fearlessly replies, "Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: if we this day are judged for a good deed done to the helpless man, by what means he has been made well, 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. This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:8-12).

The authorities were in a quandary. They could not deny the miracle - the man who had been lame was walking about among all the people. But to allow Peter and John to go on preaching threatened their own position of superiority and power, as they saw it. So they command Peter and John not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Peter and John, and remember that these men had just spent one night in prison, fearlessly reject such a charge. They reply, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20). In this way, they set the Christian priorities for today.

Richard Wurmbbrand, a Romanian pastor, was imprisoned and persecuted for 14 years by the Communists for preaching Christ. He and his friends were forbidden by the guards, under pain of beating, to preach Christ in the prison. He recounts how, nevertheless, he and his friends continued to preach Christ. He adds, "So the guards beat us and they were happy; we were able to preach Christ and we were happy!"

At this stage, it is useful to highlight the main features of Peter's preaching. They are:

1. The death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The emphasis was not so much upon the life of Jesus as His death and resurrection. These two themes always appeared side by side - the one is as essential as the other. The resurrection is God's demonstration to the world that the penalty paid by His Son for our sins is complete. No more remains to be done! At a time when the resurrection of Jesus is denied by so many, it is important today to keep this same emphasis upon His death and resurrection.

2. The necessity for repentance for sin in accepting Christ as Saviour.

Repentance is more than just feeling sorry for sin. It implies a turning away from sin and a turning to Christ. That repentance is just as necessary today.

So far, in what we have looked at in Peter the evangelist, we have seen him at work amongst his fellow people, the Jews. Through him, God abundantly blessed the preaching of the Gospel. Peter and the other apostles had been brought up as Jews. They believed that they alone were the chosen people of God. They struggled with the idea that God should now be ready to bless not only the Jews but also outcast Gentiles, as they saw them. And yet the Lord's commission to the disciples, as we have seen, had been to preach the good news of the Gospel "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And that had to include Gentiles - all those people who were not Jews.

Our final look at Peter the evangelist this morning is to see him sharing the Gospel with Gentiles. The story is found in Acts 10. Cornelius was a centurion in Caesar's army. He lived in Caesarea, about 50 miles north west of Jerusalem. Cornelius, a God fearing man, was told by God in a vision to send for Peter, who was staying at Joppa, about 35 miles away - no small distance in those days! (Acts 10:1-8) At the same time, Peter was being prepared by God for this momentous occasion. (Acts 10:9-16) Three times over, in a vision, Peter saw a great sheet let down from heaven, containing all kinds of animals, some of which were unclean and not to be eaten, according to Peter's Jewish upbringing. Upon being told by God, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat", Peter replies, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean" (Acts 10:10-14). In passing, we should just note that "Not so, Lord" is a contradiction in terms. If Jesus is to be my Lord, I must be obedient to Him in everything! So God has to say to Peter, "What God has cleansed you must not call common" (Acts 10:15). These are important words and absolutely vital in the bringing of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

As Peter wondered about the meaning of these words, the servants of Cornelius arrived at Peter's lodging, asking for him. (Acts 10:17-18) Peter was instructed by the Holy Spirit to go with them to Cornelius. (Acts 10:19-23) Cornelius welcomed Peter, saying, "Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God" (Acts 10:33). Peter replies in words of the utmost importance, "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (Acts 10:34-35). He continues, "Jesus of Nazareth ... whom [the Jews] killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day ... and He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:34-43). Peter's preaching to Cornelius was just the same as his earlier preaching to the Jews. Even while he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came upon the believing Gentiles, who were then baptised.

When Peter had first confessed the Lord Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God", Jesus said to him, "...I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:13-19). Jesus' words in no way imply that Peter has any control over who is accepted into heaven, or turned away from it. Jesus Himself is the only way into heaven. (John 14:6) It might be said that Peter used one of these keys on the Day of Pentecost when many Jews heard the Gospel through him and believed. He used another key in the house of Cornelius when many Gentiles heard that same Gospel and believed.

Lord, give us more evangelists like Peter!

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