

'The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus'

Peter Dray

KEYWORDS: historical, fulfilment, gospel, repentance, forgiveness, death of Jesus, resurrection, Old Testament, evangelism, missionary vision, Holy Spirit, Pentecost, 'last days', prophecy, witness, judgement, eternity

Acts was written by Luke, who was a close associate and friend of the apostle Paul, and Luke actually wrote proportionately more of the New Testament than any other writer in writing his gospel and Acts. And Luke clearly wanted us to read his gospel and Acts as two volumes of the same work. Look down at Acts 1:1. Luke starts, 'In my former book Theophilus . . .'. Luke is clearly expecting his readers to have already read his gospel. Acts is a continuation of his gospel account.

And so, please flick back to Luke 1:1-4, because now we can see that these verses serve not only as an introduction to the book of Luke, but an introduction to the book of Acts as well. Luke starts his account in this way:

¹Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ²just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

So, then, why did Luke sit down to write? I think in these verses we see two big reasons: one is covered in verse 4 – 'so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught'. As you'll probably know, Christianity is a *historical* religion. By this I mean that Christianity relies on certain events happening – if they didn't happen, then Christianity would completely unravel. This contrasts with other religions and worldviews, where it doesn't really matter whether historical events happened or not. So, for instance, if somehow it was conclusively proved that the Buddha didn't really exist, then this wouldn't really affect the nature of Buddhism, as Buddhism is all about training your mind and having certain attitudes. And you can do those things whether or not Buddha lived. But the claims of Christianity centre on certain things being objectively and historically true – particularly focusing on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. If these things didn't happen, then Christianity is untrue. For instance, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, if Jesus' resurrection didn't happen, then you are still in your sins. Christianity is a fake, it's a hoax, it's fraudulent – you can throw your Bible in the bin. And so Luke says that he's carefully investigated things so that his readership can know the *certainty of the things they have been taught*, so that any doubt about the veracity of these events is taken away.

But there's another reason why Luke wrote. Let's read verse 1 again: 'Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us . . .'. It's easy to miss, but here is the other reason why Luke sat down to write his gospel and the book of Acts: because he wanted to show that the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and the proclamation of the gospel are a *fulfilment of promises*; promises made by God in the Old Testament. Luke is saying this: God has made promises in the Old Testament and I have written my books to show how these promises came to fruition amongst us. It's a bit like when a friend borrows a fiver and promises to pay you back, and then one day later – probably when you've forgotten all about it – he gives it back to you. His promise to you is fulfilled.

This theme of fulfilment runs right through the gospel of Luke and through Acts. Flick forward to the last chapter of Luke's Gospel, Luke 24, because here we see some fascinating verses. The context is that Jesus has died and has been resurrected. Firstly let's read from verse 13:

¹³Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem.

¹⁴They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶but they were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

¹⁹"What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²²In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

²⁵He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!

²⁶Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ²⁷And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Now there's a lot that could be said about these verses,

but I particularly wanted to draw your attention to verses 26-27. Look at them again: Jesus says, "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.'

What is Jesus saying? He's saying this: You should have known. You should have known from the Old Testament that the Christ – God's anointed King – was going to have to suffer. And do you see the amazing thing? It's not just certain passages from the Old Testament that Jesus relied on to explain his suffering and death. It was from 'Moses and all the prophets', what was said in 'all the Scriptures'. Jesus is saying: 'You should have known. My death was not Plan B. It was the one true God's one true plan to rescue the world. And the whole of the Old Testament points to it, all of it. What you are seeing is a fulfilment of the Old Testament.' Now look down to verse 44. This is now Jesus speaking to his disciples:

⁴⁴He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

⁴⁵Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Here we see an echoing of some of the themes we've already seen – fulfilment, the whole of the Old Testament pointed forward to Jesus. But notice the link between verses 44 and 45. Jesus says that everything must be fulfilled from the Old Testament – verse 44 – but look at what Jesus says that this entails. Verse 46 – it involves his death and resurrection – but look at verse 47 – it also involves 'repentance and forgiveness of sins preached in his name to all nations'. In other words, do you see what two themes Jesus picks out from the Old Testament to be fulfilled? Firstly – his own death and resurrection; but *secondly* the spread of the gospel of repentance and forgiveness across the world. The spread of the gospel is a promise that God has made, and it will be fulfilled.

Now if you are observant you will have noticed a curious thing. Jesus says the spread of the gospel and the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins is – verse 44 – written about *him*. Now this is curious! What is Jesus on about here? This is a shock to us! So often we think in a way rather like this: Jesus has done his bit, but now he's gone back to heaven and left us to do the rest whilst he watches on. We often hear sentiments like this when we're calling people to be involved in evangelism. But do you how this renders Jesus? Distant, merely observing, just watching, not actually bothered whether or not people come to know him. Well, if that's how you've been thinking then let verses 44-47 sink in: Jesus says he is *as involved with the proclamation of the gospel to all nations as he was in his own death and res-*

urrection. And now perhaps you can begin to see the structure of the books of Luke and Acts – Luke's Gospel is dedicated to the first half of that fulfilment, to Jesus' suffering and death and resurrection. And what is Acts all about? It's what Jesus speaks about in verse 47, the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name, to all nations.

Just in case you don't believe me, flick back over to Acts 1. Look at verses 1-2:

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus *began to do and to teach* until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

Do you see the key word? 'Began'! Luke says, 'In my first book I dealt with all that Jesus began to do and to teach until his ascension into heaven after his resurrection. But this was only the *beginning* of the works of Jesus.' Jesus' saving work is over – his death and resurrection are final and complete – but Jesus isn't finished.

This is absolutely crucial for understanding the purpose of the book of Acts and to know what we're supposed to be doing now. Because the clear implication is that *now* – now that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father – he is *not finished*. He is not dead and he is not absent. He is alive and he is present. He is still working. And he is working through his Holy Spirit so that the gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to all nations.

And so the book of Acts is not just the 'Acts of the Apostles' – in fact, that's not a very good name for the book at all – instead, it is the acts of the risen, living, enthroned Jesus. He said in Matthew 16, 'I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' This is Luke's point. Jesus began his doing and teaching until he was taken up to heaven. Now he goes on completing his doing and teaching – he goes on building his church and drawing people into his kingdom just as he said he would. And this is recorded in the book of Acts. Acts 1:8 gives Jesus' command to be witness to him, to take the gospel first of all to Jerusalem, then to Judea, then to Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. First we see the gospel proclaimed in Jerusalem. By chapter 8, the gospel reaches Judea and Samaria, and at the end of the book of Acts, Paul is proclaiming the gospel in Rome, the centre of the Gentile world, and symbolic of 'the ends of the earth'.

The first application of all this is: **Christians must be those that read and cherish the Old Testament.** It's true that Jesus fulfils the whole of the Old Testament, but the Old Testament is not rendered useless. For one thing, it's through the Old Testament that we understand what Jesus was doing through his earthly ministry, and what he's now doing through us in the world. The Bible writers assumed that their readers knew the Old Testament. We understand Jesus better as we know the Old Testament better. It's a bit like when you're watching the second part of a two part drama on TV without having seen part 1. You can more or less understand what's going on, but you'd understand things in greater clarity if you'd seen the first part. And it's the same with the Bible. You'd not just go to watch the second half of a play. You'd want to know the whole story. And to get the whole story of what God is doing in the world, we need to know the background, we need to know part 1. In

other words, we need to know and be familiar with the Old Testament.

The second application is this: what we've seen has **massive implications for how we read the book of Acts**. Quite often Christians say things like this, 'It would be great if Christians could get back to how things were in Acts 2, or Acts 4.' And quite often there are some really good motives behind saying things like this. But I hope that you see now that this slightly misses the point that Luke is trying to make in Acts, because the gospel isn't restricted any more to just Jerusalem or just Judea. The way that we relate to the book of Acts is that we follow what is written there – we're not in chapter 2, but metaphorically in chapter 29: what Jesus did after the gospel reached Rome. And so whilst we'll learn things about the gospel and about church and about evangelism from the early chapters of Acts, we mustn't forget that our situation is somewhat different.

The final implication is this: **our evangelism is something that the risen Lord Jesus himself is active in!** Jesus is not a passive observer of our evangelism, but he is there, working in us and through us, in order to make sure that the gospel message of repentance and forgiveness of sins is taken to all peoples. And that is a challenge and an encouragement. The challenge is this: to see the proclamation of the gospel in the same way as Jesus does. He sees it as vital! We're not at liberty to see evangelism or involvement in mission as just being for the keen ones or the faithful few. Involvement in telling other people about Jesus is a defining activity for all Christians, regardless of your natural talent at speaking to other people or who you are or what you're like. Gospel proclamation is for all – and we'll see that Jesus has equipped all Christians who have trusted in him with everything that they need to do so.

But the news that Jesus is active is also an encouragement, because Christian mission and Christian evangelism are rooted in the very nature of God himself. The whole thrust of the Old Testament, says Jesus, pointed towards proclamation of the gospel to the nations. And that means that we can think of God as the great missionary: he has a missionary vision, creates a missionary people and then sends them out on a missionary expedition throughout the world. Sometimes we think that God is less bothered about our friends being saved than we are. Scripture shows that he is intimately concerned with and involved in all elements of Christian mission.

Acts 2: 'Caught To Catch'

I wonder if any of you know a game that we used to play in the playground at Junior School. It was called 'Chain Gang'. The game would start with two people who linked arms. The idea was that they would try and catch someone in between them. Anyone that was then caught would join in the chain. Soon the chain would be very long and swirl around the whole playground. The idea was to try and make sure that you were the last to be caught in the chain. If you were in the chain, you caught people in order that they could join the chain and catch others. And this idea of *being caught so that you can catch others* is a central idea in the passage just read to us.

Acts 2 is sometimes thought to be a controversial passage, but actually – as we'll see – it has a simple message at its core. It's this: **we urgently need to take God's gospel message to the world**. And we're going to look at three reasons for why this is so.

The first reason is that **we've been given the Holy Spirit to do so** (verses 1-13). Verse 1 shows us that all of the events that followed took place on a day called Pentecost. Pentecost was the second of three annual Jewish harvest festivals, and Jews – both ethnically, and those who had converted to Judaism – would have thronged around the streets of Jerusalem. So people from across the known world were already in Jerusalem. But whilst the streets would have had a carnival atmosphere, Jesus' disciples were huddled together in one place. They were almost certainly still terrified – maybe even slightly unable to make sense of what had happened since Jesus' ascension into heaven.

And then – suddenly – the Spirit of God comes upon the disciples, accompanied by three supernatural signs. Verse 2 talks about a 'sound like a blowing of a violent wind' – not a violent wind, but *something like* its sound. Then they see something incredible – 'what seemed to be tongues of fire' – again, precisely what came was beyond concise description. Something incredible, something supernatural, is taking place. And then, thirdly, they began to speak in other tongues – verse 4.

I think if I had been Luke, I would have spent lots of time thinking about these incredible sounds and sights that came at Pentecost: they were evidently incredible! But Luke doesn't do so. Instead, he concentrates on the *new tongues* that were being spoken by the disciples.

Now there's some debate about precisely what these tongues were. There's been an awful lot of ink spilled by Christians down the ages as they've thought about whether the tongues here were the same as those spoken about by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12-14. But to get caught up in this detail at this point is to miss what Luke's trying to say: here, speaking in tongues was a miracle of *hearing* – see verse 6: 'when they heard this sound, a great crowd came together in bewilderment, *because each one heard them speaking his own language*.' Luke's emphasis is on the language that the people there heard.

I'm a person prone to exaggeration. Well the great thing is that there's biblical warrant for it! Luke does exactly the same thing here. In verse 5, Luke says that 'every nation from under heaven' was represented in Jerusalem that day. I remember reading this passage once with a person who wanted to tell me that you couldn't trust the Bible because presumably the Aborigines and native North American tribesmen weren't there, which was of course true. But the list in verses 9-11 shows that the whole of the known world was represented: a clockwise list of all of the areas around the Mediterranean at that time. Between them, they would have spoken many, many languages. Furthermore, verse 7 reminds us that the speakers were Galileans, who had the reputation for being yokels, not very cultured or gifted at speaking other languages.

And so do you see Luke's point? The group of people there in Jerusalem was *diverse, cosmopolitan and multi-national*. God had ensured it by sending his Spirit at Pentecost, where a crowd was *already* assembled. Isn't it great to think that even

when God gave the Law to Moses, thousands of years earlier, he included this law regarding a harvest festival so that people might be in Jerusalem when he gave his Spirit. God brought an international crowd to Jerusalem and then poured out the Spirit so that, supernaturally, the disciples might be able to proclaim the gospel to the nations. The whole miracle is a clear sign that the Holy Spirit has been given for a specific purpose – to help disciples of Jesus spread the good news of Christ throughout the world. And so Acts 2 is a great case in point on what we have already looked at. God himself is the great missionary who is committed to saving all sorts of different kinds of people. One writer, John Stott, puts it like this: ‘The Holy Spirit of the Book of Acts is a missionary Spirit. Pentecost was essentially a missionary event. Jesus promised that after the Holy Spirit had come upon them, his followers would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth. And the Book of Acts is the fulfilment of that beginning. We watch enthralled as the missionary Spirit creates a missionary people and sends them out on their missionary adventure, beginning in Jerusalem and ending in Rome, the capital of the world.’

What a wonderful gift the Holy Spirit is to God’s people! Do you remember what Jesus says in John 16 that the Holy Spirit will do? He will convict people of sin, and of righteousness and of the judgement to come. And it’s the Spirit who brings new life. Now this is comforting, because I’ve found that I can’t do any of those things by myself. I can’t convict people of sin. I can’t bring new life. In fact, none of us can do any of these things. Without the Holy Spirit, our evangelism would about be as successful as going into a graveyard and whispering to the dead bodies that they really should get up. *But* we have the life-giving Spirit, who shows people their need for Jesus and who brings life to the dead. He goes with us as we proclaim the good news about Jesus.

We so easily forget this. One of the great things brought to the western church in the 20th Century was a new discovery of the work of the Holy Spirit. I think the church at large is now more aware than, say, certainly 100 years ago, of what the Holy Spirit does in our lives. It’s been great to see in recent years a rediscovery of Spirit-filled joyful worship and service – we’ve been reminded that it’s a wonderfully joyful thing to be a Christian, to be rescued, to know God and have the prospect of spending eternity with him. But I wonder if we have become indulgent in our relationship with the Holy Spirit. We enjoy great times of heartfelt sung worship to God, and they’re wonderful times as the Spirit ministers to us and applies his truths to our hearts – but then we do not respond any further. It’s just for us. Or the Spirit gives us wisdom and understanding as we delve into Scripture and discover the wonderful things there – but then we do not respond any further. It’s just for us. Or we feel that we are being transformed and equipped for ministry – and yet never use that transforming and equipping. We’ve never had it so good – and yet one of the very things the church has been given the Spirit for is ignored. It’s a bit like car enthusiasts who spend all of their free Sundays souping up their motors, but never actually get around to driving them.

John Stott, again, says this: ‘You tell me you believe in God. He is a missionary God. Are you committed to Christ? He is a missionary Christ. You claim to be filled with the

Holy Spirit. He is a missionary Spirit. It is impossible to avoid these things. Mission is integral to authentic Christianity; Christianity without mission is Christianity no longer. For mission is rooted in the very nature of God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’

And so this is my first point: a Spirit-filled Christian will have a heart for mission; for taking the gospel anywhere and everywhere. It’s as simple as that. They’ll care about taking the gospel to Lancaster and they’ll care about taking the gospel to other countries. As we’ve seen, God’s gospel is for everyone. All have rebelled against God – and the good news of forgiveness and life with God is for all too – for Chinese and Britons and Albanians and Zambians. God’s gospel is for all. It’s something we see as the gospel is taken to the nations in microcosm at Pentecost. Through the Spirit-breathed Spirit-driven gospel, God is calling together a multinational group of people, united in Christ. And so the first reason from Acts 2 to urgently preach the gospel to the world is that we’ve been given God the Holy Spirit in order to do so.

Secondly, we are to **urgently take the gospel to the world because we live in the last days** (verse 14-21). In these verses, Peter gets up and *explains* the events that have just happened. Pentecost isn’t only something that affected the disciples – it had much greater significance in biblical history. In fact, do you see, in verses 14-16, Peter says that it should not have come as a surprise to the Jewish people he was speaking to? This extraordinary phenomenon of Spirit-filled believers declaring God’s wonders in foreign languages is the fulfilment of an Old Testament idea. In particular, the declaring of God’s wonders in tongues is the fulfilment of the prophet Joel’s prophecy that God would pour out his Spirit on all believers, in what he called the ‘last days’. And so, Peter says – verse 17 – a new era has begun; the last days. In the Bible, the last days stretch between the two comings of Christ, where the Spirit will play a new role. In the Old Testament, the Spirit came upon certain individuals only, like kings and prophets, to equip them for specific tasks. But now, says Peter, he will be poured out generously – to sons and daughters, to old and young. So the pouring out will be to all Christians, irrespective of their gender or their age or their social status.

And this pouring out is so that they can *prophecy*. Again, there’s debate within the church today about precisely what prophecy is. Here it’s probably referring to any verbal communication of the gospel. Certainly, in verse 16, Peter seems to identify what had already taken place – the declaration of the gospel to people of all nations – as prophecy. But don’t miss the point here: the universal gift of the Spirit will be given to all, leading to a universal ministry where *everyone will prophecy*.

All this alludes to another passage from the Old Testament. In Numbers 11, remember this is in the Old Testament when the Spirit wasn’t given to everyone, Moses cries out in frustration with these words: ‘I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!’ And now, in Acts 2, Moses’ prayer is being answered. The universal gift of the Spirit leads to a universal ministry of *prophecy*. All Christians can now communicate the gospel, aided by the Spirit, not just some of them. It’s not that we’ve got to ask ourselves: ‘Will the Holy Spirit use

my witness?' The answer is: if you are a genuine believer, then the Spirit *will* use your words in your witness.

This is such a reassurance! Not only does this mean that we don't have to decide who to speak to – we've already seen that the gospel is for absolutely everybody! – but we also don't have to wonder whether or not we've got God's power. The Holy Spirit means that, because we know Christ, we can make him known, all of us. We may not be Billy Graham or Rico Tice, but each of us is fully equipped to speak. We may not be eloquent, but each of us can give a reason for the hope that we have.

And it's urgent because we live in the 'last days'. Verses 19-20 refer to God's judgement of all people, which will come at the end of the last days. In the history of what God is doing in the world, everything has now happened so that only Jesus' return and judgement is left. We might say that Jesus' return and Judgement Day is the next big date in God's diary. And so the last days are days of Spirit-filled and Spirit-powered witness. They are urgent days, because the great Day of the Lord could come soon. But they are also days of opportunity, during which the gospel is preached to all peoples and all nations, throughout the world. And amazingly, as verse 21 puts it, 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'.

I used to have a housemate at university called Liz who had one annoying trait: to ask the question, 'Does it matter in eternity?' She'd ask this question in an attempt to diffuse problems – only it could get quite annoying. Someone wouldn't do the washing up, somebody else would get annoyed, and she'd say, 'Does it matter in eternity?' Or someone would record over someone else's video of a programme they wanted to watch, they'd get stressed out, and Liz would ask, 'Does it matter in eternity?' Now that can sometimes be quite an annoying question! But it is also a good question to ask, because as Christians, we are called to be people who have eternity in view. And we're reminded of this as we consider that we are in the 'last days': the next day in God's diary is Jesus' second coming and judgement.

So let's ask, 'Does it matter in eternity?' Your CU activity in Lancaster? Does it matter in eternity, or are you caught up with other things? I know myself that it's very easy in CU to get caught up with the trappings – with room bookings and socials and emails and meetings and the rest. Even though the CU has been set up with eternity in mind, we never do anything with eternal consequence. CU just becomes a social club and our witness is non-existent. Or the other danger is this: we know that evangelism should be a priority, but we've forgotten about eternity and we're only bothered about results in the short term. We're only bothered about packed meetings and looking cool on campus – which ultimately don't matter in eternity.

We live in the 'last days' and there stretches a time of opportunity during which the gospel must be proclaimed throughout the world. And we have been equipped by the Spirit – all of us – to speak for Jesus. Let's live with eternity in view, because 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'.

Thirdly, we are to **urgently take the gospel to the world because Jesus' sacrifice is effective for all who will trust in him** (verses 22-41). I used to think that Pentecost was a really happy occasion, and of course, it is a really significant

day in the life of the church, from where God starts an intimacy of relationship with his people that Old Testament believers could have only dreamed about. And yet, Peter's speech in verses 22 onwards, we see that Pentecost was also chilling for the original audience.

I'm not going to go into detail now, but Peter, having convinced the crowd of the fact that Pentecost is a fulfilment of Joel's prophecy, now sketches out the connection of the events that day with the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Effectively Peter does two things. He persuades them that Jesus of Nazareth really was the divine King, promised in the Old Testament – but that they were the very ones who rejected him and were responsible for his death.

And he also convinces his listeners that the Spirit's coming signals the fact that judgement is coming. Jesus is alive, the sin he took on the cross is now paid for, and he has been raised to life forever. The same Lord that promised an outpouring of the Spirit promised the Messiah. And the Spirit's outpouring is proof of the beginning of Messiah's reign that will come in its fullness when he returns in judgement. And Jesus himself will act as judge.

Now, put yourselves in the shoes of the Jewish audience who were there in Jerusalem at Pentecost. They've just seen this incredible miracle of tongues, and they've realized the Old Testament significance of this. We're in the last days and judgement is coming. And Peter's sketched what this means: Jesus, the King who has been raised to life by God the Father, is the very one who will judge. And there you are standing, a Jew; perhaps one of those who condemned Jesus to death just a couple of months earlier, or walked past him on the cross, scoffing. The one who had been sent by God, condemned to a cross. But now he's been raised to life and coming back as judge. You'd be terrified, and rightly so! You've rejected the God of the Universe in human form, and now he's coming back in judgement. It's not that you'd killed a prophet from God, but you had murdered the Messiah. Peter's speech finishes with this chilling statement: "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, *whom you crucified*, both Lord and Christ."

So it's no wonder that we read in verse 37, that those in the crowd were cut to the heart and asked, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' They must have been terrified, desperate, having crucified the King and Judge of the Universe.

And the amazing answer to their question comes in verse 38: 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.' This is incredible! There is good news, even for those who killed Christ, because he welcomes even those who murdered him. The very act that showed their guilt, in crucifying him, was the very act used by God for their forgiveness! Even those that crucified Christ are forgiven by repenting and trusting in him.

I work with a CU in Ambleside, in the middle of the Lake District. And sometimes I go walking up in the mountains with some of the students there who study Outdoors Studies [What a great course!]. Once, we came into a little glacial valley, and some of the lads there said it was OK to walk on the ice, because the ice there was thick. They were the experts, but I wasn't, so I didn't try. I thought maybe the ice would be too thin. Now imagine if, somehow, a juggernaught had been there that day, and had driven over the ice. What would I have thought? I'd think something like this, 'Jug-

gernaught – heavy. Yet the ice held the weight. Me – lighter than the juggernaught – I'll be fine.'

And the same principle applies here. If we were going to list the most horrific sin of all time, we'd probably go for knowingly murdering the God of the Universe. And yet, Peter says, forgiveness and a completely fresh start are both possible because of the cross of Jesus. So do you see what the passage is saying? Regardless of how bad a person is, they can be forgiven. Jesus will welcome anyone because he has taken the punishment for them. Regardless of how bad anyone else is, it's possible for them to be forgiven and declared innocent through *repentance*.

So can I ask you: have you repented yet? Repentance is one of those biblical words that doesn't really get used in other circumstances. It has the idea of changing direction. We used to live as though we were at the centre of the Universe, but now we admit that God is rightfully there. God has the right to call the shots in our life. We try not to sin any more because we don't want to rebel against God any longer. And notice it's by *repentance* that a person receives forgiveness and the Holy Spirit. We often ask what a Christian is, and Peter says it's trusting Jesus in *repentance*. Can I ask you: is your heart repentant? Have a look deep down. When it boils down to it, do you want to go God's way or your own way? Often people think they are Christians, but actually they've never repented, they've never given up the right to run their own lives and hand it over to God. Think about those areas where God asks us to do something that naturally we find hard. Is your heart repentant? If so, then you can be sure that you are forgiven, because of Jesus' death on the cross.

It's very easy for people to start treating Jesus as a kind of ticket to heaven, but not actually to have a repentant heart. Don't fall into that trap. Repent and put Jesus where he belongs.

Well I guess that there will be some who have never repented for their sin. Others have perhaps trusted in Jesus in the past, but have somehow slipped up. And you're thinking, 'Does Jesus really accept me?' Well look back at the cross. Jesus willingly took all the punishment that we deserved. He did it, not because we're wonderful or convinced God that we're worth saving, but because he's the

kind of God that loves friendship with his people. This is the gospel at its most wonderful. God offers complete and total forgiveness in Jesus. And he not only forgives us, but wipes the record of our sin away and credits the righteousness of Jesus to us. And it's open to all. As Peter puts it, '*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*': there is no-one outside the reach of Jesus' salvation. It's a blow to our pride to be told that we can't make ourselves right with God – but take a step back and look at the God that is revealed: a God who loves to help people that can't help themselves.

The message of repentance and forgiveness of sin is a wonderful message for us and it's a wonderful message for the world. It means that everyone we meet, each of your friends is not outside the scope of Jesus' salvation. As the hymn puts it, 'The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives'.

And that gives us great confidence: our gospel message is for all because the message is of grace and able to save anyone! And not only this, but we are also given the Spirit, so that through us God can take his message of forgiveness to others too. People are caught in order to catch, like that game in the playground. But the difference is that God's power is the side of the catchers! What an encouragement this is! Not only is the gospel is for all nationalities, but it is for all people regardless of what they are like. And the Holy Spirit has been given to each of us in these last days so we can all speak this gospel message with God's own power!

And so, we come to our conclusion. Why are we to proclaim the gospel? We're to do it because all true believers have the life-giving Spirit within us, who uses our words as we proclaim to change hearts. We're to do it because we live in the last days, and judgement is coming. And we're to do it because the message that we have is a message of grace and it is potent – it really is able to bring forgiveness and life with God forever, because of Jesus' sacrifice. So let's keep speaking for Jesus. And the encouragement is that, as we do this, we are sharing God's heartbeat.

Peter Dray is a UCCF Staff Worker based in Lancaster.

To be continued...