

Scripture: Joel 2: 1-11; 28-32  
Text: Acts 2: 19-21

ser27-14

### **GRACE AND JUDGMENT IN THE AGE OF THE SPIRIT**

With Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church and in connection with that event God said that He will *".. show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below,..."* God went on to speak of *"...blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood ..."* All this, says the text, will take place *"...before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord."*

Many people have witnessed such signs when they experienced an exploding volcano. The cloud of volcanic ash darkened the sun and at night the moon took on the colour of blood. In Australia we have the same result from bushfires. The smoke dulls the shining of the sun, turning it into a red ball, and the same with moon at night.

Volcanoes are natural disasters and bushfires are often man-made disasters. There are also other man-made disasters and you can think of the raging of war, burning towns and villages. There is real blood with the fires and the billows of smoke.

But now what has all this got to do with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church? When we think of Pentecost then we call to mind that not long after Jesus ascended to heaven, He gave His Spirit to the church. The Spirit of God enables the church to take the gospel of salvation to the ends of the earth. However, God's Word here in our text is telling us that Pentecost is not just for the church reaching out to the nations. The coming of God's Spirit has also far-reaching effects upon the whole of creation. The Scripture here in Acts 2 speaks of God showing wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth - and in connection with that there is mention of blood, fire and smoke. What has that to do with the church?

We need to think here about Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds. The wheat is God's church and the weeds are the unbelievers and their ungodly doings in the secular world. God will not pull up the weeds just yet because it will also harm the wheat. Only at the final judgment will the wheat and weeds be separated for good and God will then save the one and destroy the other. So right up to the Lord's coming, the church and the secular world will have to exist side by side.

Therefore, the outpouring of the Spirit on the church has certain consequences for the world as well. We know that believers must not be an isolated community in the world. We also, like the rest of men, are to live and work in the world. It is in the world that we are to do our believing and existing. We too have to work with the world's money. So, the church is not standing apart from the world.

In fact, even the cosmos, the universe, is somehow involved with the church. As you know, the church of Jesus Christ is going to inherit the new earth. The creation now is groaning as in pains of childbirth. The creation is longing to be delivered from her bondage to decay. And she will be liberated from her imperfection when Christ comes. But Christ will only come when all the elect have been gathered into the church. So the fullness and perfection of the church at the end of time will also bring about the renewal of this present creation - yes, the whole cosmos. It will be a new heaven and earth! There will be a new order of things. The old will pass away and the new will come.

Now we're saying all this to make you realise that when the Spirit was poured out upon the church then it should not surprise you overmuch when this passage here from Acts refers to things happening in the heavens above and on the earth below. Everybody and everything, believers and unbelievers, church and world, yes, the whole creation, is somehow affected by the outpouring of God's Spirit on the church. The forces of Pentecost take hold of the universe, the sun, moon, stars, and all the planets, yes, heaven and earth and all what has been made. For all of that is involved in the recreation of all things. And since that first Pentecost God is heading towards that direction with His people and this world.

On the island of Patmos, still in the first century AD, and therefore only a few years after Pentecost, the apostle John could already jubilantly cry out about the future he was made to see in a vision: *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away ..."* [Rev.21:1]. From

John's time-slot in history, in the first century AD, it was still the beginning of all the many things that the church after Pentecost would have to go through. The trials and tribulations, the wars and rumours of war, the persecutions and the anti-Christ, the sufferings of God's people and the responses of God to the wicked in temporal judgements - all that was gaining momentum. But John could see over the top of it all, yes beyond it as it were, to the new heaven and the new earth. And Pentecost, the coming of the Spirit, had set it all in motion.

In a manner of speaking we can say that with the first Pentecost the world and its people, including the church, have turned into the final leg of their journey towards the new order of things. It's bit like you travelling to Perth across the Nullarbor. After travelling all that way from the Eastern States, some 2500 kilometres, you can say when you have reached Norseman - now for the final leg of the journey, the last 700 or so kilometres, . We only have to travel that last bit and then we're home.

The church has been travelling since the beginning of time. The Old Testament period was a long journey. Not billions of years, more like 4000 years. A lot of things happened from the creation to Pentecost. But in His plan of salvation and under God's providence, the church made it to Pentecost. Now from there to the renewal of all things at Jesus' coming is the last leg of the journey. The church is almost there. We're almost home. The church is within sight of its final destination.

But so is the world. So are the unbelievers. They may not know it like the church knows it. But time is running out for them as well. And it is so for the whole present creation.

Now we need to realise that at the end there will be both grace and judgment. For the church of Jesus Christ it will be grace. For on that new earth God will dwell with His people in unbroken fellowship. He will live among you. All believers will be His people, and all this in the fullest sense imaginable. God Himself will be with us and be our God. He will wipe every tear from our eyes. When we feast eternally with the Lord in heaven there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things will have passed away [Rev. 21:3,4]. All things will be made perfect and new. Just like paradise of old, only better - because we will experience the fulfilment of all of Christ's promises. So for the church the end will be a time of never-ending grace, full and free.

But at the end there will also be judgment. Because the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practise magic arts, the idolaters and all liars - their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulphur [Rev.21:8]. For those who have not repented and not believed - at the end theirs will a never-ending judgment. So at the end, at the Lord's coming, it will be grace for the church and judgment for the unrepentant and ungodly.

But what this passage from Acts is saying is that such grace and such judgment do not come only at the end. Yes, at the end it will be full grace and full judgment. But on this final leg of world history, on this last bit of the journey from Pentecost to the second coming, there will be a measure of both grace and judgment all along the way. Verse 17 says: "*In the last days. . .*" Not "At the very end." But "*In the last days. . .*" Now!

You see, whenever God comes to put into place various aspects of His plan of salvation, then it is a coming in grace and judgment. It was already so with the first coming of Christ. His forerunner, John the Baptist, spoke to the crowds about Jesus making the crooked roads straight and the rough places smooth. Now that's grace. It was also grace when John said that Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit. But John also spoke of the axe being at the root of the trees. Every tree not producing good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Now that's judgment.

During the Lord's own ministry on earth there was also a tremendous amount of grace. With the coming of His kingdom the lame walked, the blind were made to see, the deaf could hear, the dumb could speak and even the dead were raised. But at the same time the Lord spoke of judgment on the hypocritical and blind Pharisees. His words to Judas were words of judgment and he even experienced it. And the Lord Jesus warned of the destruction coming on Jerusalem, which it did in AD 70 where the Romans squashed the Jewish rebellion. All this grace and judgment was foretold through the old prophet Simeon who said, when he held the Christ child in His arms: "*This child is set for the falling and rising of many in Israel.*"

And now at Pentecost, with the outpouring of the Spirit, God also spoke of grace and judgment. But it is going to speed up. The church and the world, yes the whole creation, has reached the last leg of their respective journeys. From Pentecost to the second coming is the last stretch and there will more grace and more judgment all along the way.

The words of our text, and the verses before it, were words which the apostle Peter quoted from the prophet Joel who was from Old Testament times. In his own day Joel had first said these words from God: "*In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will prophesy.*"

Yes, this is the grace of Pentecost. All of God's people, sons and daughters, young and old, servants, both men and women, they will all receive the Spirit and they will all prophesy and see visions. God's Spirit will be upon the church in such abundance that all of God's people will be able to speak about Christ and clearly see what Christ means for all of life.

But then Joel also spoke of wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below. And Joel in his day already saw the blood, fire and billows of smoke. The signs of judgment on earth which have their origin in heaven. The time of Joel was a terrible time. Judah was having a locust plague that was brought upon them by God with the hope that it would bring His covenant people to repentance. The land was in ruins and the people faced starvation because everything was eaten. And Joel spoke of this awful locust plague as "*the great and dreadful day of the Lord*". [2:31].

We are inclined to think of the great and dreadful day of the Lord as the final judgment at the end of time when Christ appears as the great Judge. But Joel didn't do that. For him the terrible locusts and the ruin they caused was also the great and dreadful day of the Lord. He saw all too clearly that God had come there and then in judgment because His people had not repented when He, the Lord, had for so long had shown His grace.

And now with Pentecost the apostle Peter repeats these words of Joel, except that he didn't say, "*the great and dreadful day of the Lord.*" [vs.20] but "*the great and glorious day of the Lord.*" To be sure, the situation in Peter's day was quite different from Joel's day. With Pentecost there was no desolation and ruin caused by locusts. Quite to the contrary, Pentecost was actually the Feast of Harvest, the crops of the field had just been taken in. There was no hunger but food plenty.

And the Spirit took hold of Peter and he speaks about all of God's people being filled with the Spirit. Young and old, male and female, able to speak of Christ's great and glorious salvation. It's wonderful grace. Yet, God made Peter also speak of judgment, of blood, fire and smoke, a darkened sun and the moon the colour of blood. Both grace and judgment will come at the end but also before the end.

The church between Pentecost and Christ's coming again is the church in the age of the Spirit. This time-slot is the end-time. These are the last days. We are on the last leg of the journey. There are no more great salvation events coming except the coming of the Lord. Pentecost was the last stop before the end.

But the day of the Lord has come many times. It came with the locusts in Joel's day. It came when Jesus was born and Him bringing in the kingdom. In t came when Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD. The final great and glorious day of the Lord will come at the end but many times before that the Lord comes with His grace and judgment.

God's people, young and old, men and women, employers and employees, all have the Spirit of God and they know the Lord and understand and grasp His redemption. All that is grace, wonderful, rich grace. But in the world there are also wars and rumours of wars - the Middle East, in the Sudan, Africa, Iraq, the unrest in Indonesia. There are also diseases - mad cow disease has surfaced again in Brazil, SARS, AIDS. There are droughts, catastrophes, plagues, persecution and suffering. There's a huge drug problem, greed and corruption. All that is judgment. It's the blood, fire and smoke.

We are made to think of the book Revelation. If any book of the Bible speaks of grace and judgment then it is Revelation. And this book is the last word of Christ. It is His last prophecy that covers the whole period between His first and second comings. Jesus revealed to the apostle John in those many visions the state of the church and the world in these last days. There's the rule of God from heaven over all people and over the whole of creation, the joy of the redeemed, the trials and tribulations brought on by the seven seals and the seven trumpets. And there is the great conflict between the dragon and the woman, that is, between Christ and His church and Satan. It's a combination of grace and judgment. God's people filled and moved by the Spirit, and God warning and punishing the unbelieving and the ungodly. It's all taking place on this last stretch of history from Pentecost to the second coming.

Sadly, many will not be convinced by God's last word in Christ as we have it in the book Revelation. But God's people must give heed. Indeed, what do we hear a number of times in Revelation? It are these words: "*He who has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*" Yes, that's what Pentecost means - the outpouring of God's Spirit. Hear then what the Spirit is saying to the God's people.

In this age of the Spirit grace has increased, it is there more than ever before. More so than in Old Testament times where God mainly revealed His grace to Israel. But now in these last days of history everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

But where grace abounds, sin will also. As people from all tribes, languages and nations are drawn into the kingdom of heaven, then the kingdom of the world and of Satan is whipped up into a frenzy in order to prevent the onward march of grace. Satan cannot stand it that people, young and old, men and women, are openly testifying of God's grace in Christ and living the ways of God. Satan causes the levels of godless behaviour to dip down even deeper into cesspools of moral filth. And it seems today that the spirit of secularism is stronger than the Spirit of God. But God rules and warns the unbelieving with economic upheavals, hunger, disease, and wars. The one disaster leads to the next. And all this will speed up as the end draws near.

Hence the urgency in the call to repent and believe. Think of the parables of Jesus where He comes as the Bridegroom and finds some ready and waiting but others not. Yes, the day is far gone, it is almost spent. The Scripture says: "*Children, this is last hour.*" And because the great and final day of the Lord is almost here, the church of Jesus Christ must bring the message of grace to a world facing judgment. The outpouring of the Spirit must make the church want to do that. And it will be so that everyone who really hears the call to faith and repentance will call on the name of the Lord and be saved.

But who will these be? Will it be you? Are your friends and neighbours aware of this grace and judgment all around you? Will you help them call on the name of the Lord and be saved? Will you do that before all the ungodly, all of nature, the whole creation, yes all things will be destroyed in God's final judgment? Yes, call on the name of the Lord and be saved by His grace before it is too late? Amen.

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