

# OpenTheo

## October 23rd: Acts 2:22-47 & James 1

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The beginnings of the Jerusalem church. Wisdom for trials.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Acts 2.22-47 Men of Israel, hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know, this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

For David says concerning him, I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. Therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced. My flesh also will dwell in hope, for you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.

You have made known to me the paths of life, you will make me full of gladness with your presence. Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David, that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a

prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brothers, what shall we do? And Peter said to them, Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, for the promises for you and for your children, and for all who are afar off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to himself. And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, Save yourselves from this crooked generation.

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And all came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

And all who believed were together, and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings, and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together, and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God, and having favour with all the people.

And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. On the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, Peter preaches to the crowd that has gathered to see the spectacle of the disciples speaking in tongues. He declares the fact of Jesus of Nazareth's ministry, divinely attested with mighty works, wonders and signs, his death divinely appointed by the determined plan and foreknowledge of God, and his resurrection divinely accomplished, as it was not possible for death to hold him.

In Jesus God has bared his arm, he has demonstrated his power in miracles and great deeds, through his ability to use the actions of his adversaries to achieve his own ends, and through the impotence of the grave to arrest him. The very thing that the Jewish leaders presumed would destroy Jesus was the divinely intended means of his victory, determined by God in every particular beforehand. Peter quotes Psalm 16 verses 8-11, where David provides testimony for Peter's claim that Jesus is the Messiah.

These verses are also used by Paul in his sermon in Acts 13. Acts 13 verses 26-39 has pretty much the same pattern as Peter's Pentecost sermon. These provide two examples of the preaching of the early church and how important these themes were within it.

Psalms 16, like many other passages used in the New Testament as witnesses to Jesus, is one that seems strange to us, it seems like an over-reading of the text by Peter. However, such a way of reading was not unique to Christians, and some Jewish readings understood the meaning of the text to refer to the Messiah who would rise from David. Such an understanding emerges quite naturally from the promise of the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7 verses 12-16.

The underlying themes are clear here. David would descend to his grave and lie with his fathers, but David the dynasty, coming from his own body, would be raised up and endure forever. In Jesus, the son of David, David is raised up, as a dynasty and as a body.

Isaiah speaks of this in chapter 11 verses 1-10, speaking of a time when the Davidic dynasty, which has seemingly perished beyond all hope of return, buried in the grave of exile, would be raised up and would flourish. The bold statements of Psalm 16 are but weakly fulfilled in the deliverances of David's own life. David seems to be speaking of rescue from a far more terrible foe.

If David the individual is the only subject of Psalm 16, then it is all very anticlimactic. For all of its bold words, David lies in the grave. Yet when we read the psalm more closely, we might get a hint that it is about something much greater.

It is about the body of the king in the fullest sense, about the dynasty arising from him, about the beautiful inheritance that God has determined for him. Knowing that God had promised him an everlasting kingdom, his psalm of praise spoke of something beyond merely the ways in which God delivered him from death on occasions in his own life. It glorified God for his assurance of a dynasty arising from him that would not be ended by death, a dynasty secured in the raised body of Christ, the body of the son of David, also the political body of a people that participate in his life.

We see this in Romans 1, verses 1-4. Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, concerning his son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be the son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead. The grave eventually swallows all kingdoms and empires, yet in the resurrection of Jesus Christ the kingdom of David is raised, and a king who has conquered death itself is set on the throne.

Jesus may have been raised from the dead, but that presents the obvious question of where he is now. From resurrection then, Peter turns to the ascension. Jesus was exalted

to God's right hand, and the events of Pentecost are an initial demonstration and proof of the fact that Jesus is at God's right hand.

Jesus pours out his spirit with dramatic phenomena that are evident to onlookers. As the multitude witness men and women speaking under divine inspiration in languages not their own, it is evident that something remarkable has happened. The spirit is confirming the message of the ascension.

The spirit is also the promised spirit, promised in the scriptures in places like Joel 2, which Peter has just quoted. It is also promised in passages like Ezekiel 36, verses 25-28. It is also promised in the ministry of John the Baptist in Luke 3, verses 16-17.

The spirit was also promised by Jesus himself in Acts 1, verses 8. The ascension is a fulfillment of the words of Psalm 110, verses 1, the most frequently quoted verse from the Old Testament in the entirety of the New. Once again the words of David are being quoted. Once again they cannot refer to David himself, but to refer to some greater person to whom David himself bears witness.

In Luke 20, verses 41-44, Jesus himself had tested the scribes with this verse. David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son? A careful reading of the Psalms will reveal that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises concerning David's kingdom. In light of all of this, the situation of the heroes can be seen in its true horror.

They had crucified the very one that God had made Lord and Messiah. Their response is one of great concern. They ask the apostles and disciples whether there is anything that they can do to escape the judgment that surely awaits them.

Peter charges them to repent and be baptized, promising that they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit if they do so. John's baptism had been a baptism for repentance in anticipation of the future gift of the Spirit. Now baptism and the gift of the Spirit are offered together.

Those baptized now are being plugged into the community of Pentecost, being made part of a new community that is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. This baptism is administered in the name of Jesus Christ, by His authority and into union with Him. It would seal to all who responded to the message of the apostles in faith and repentance the forgiveness of their sins.

The gift of the Spirit given here is not spiritual gifts, but the single gift of the personal presence of the Spirit within us both individually and communally, a presence that is ministered for the building up of the Church in the exercise of His manifold gifts in mutual service. Peter alludes to Old Testament scripture in speaking about the extent of the promise. Isaiah chapter 57 verse 19 Peace, peace to the far and to the near, says the Lord, and I will heal him.

Joel chapter 2 verse 32, a verse located immediately after those that he quoted in his sermon. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

Peter had earlier spoken about the way that those who called upon the name of the Lord would be saved, referring to Christ. Now he speaks about God calling people. God's call is the effective summons of the proclamation of God's kingdom, the gospel message, which assembles people to Him.

This is addressed not merely to the house of Israel, but also to people afar off, both Jews of the dispersion and Gentiles. In context, Peter's reference to the promise being for them and for their children is most immediately a reference to the house of Israel. However, many have seen in this a suggestion borne out elsewhere in Acts that the gospel message does not address us merely as detached individuals, but as members of households and peoples, whose response to the word is at once collective and individual.

The children of those who respond favourably are implicated in their parents' response, which they in their turn are expected increasingly to internalise as they mature. Peter charges his hearers to act, expressing the severity of the situation and the urgency of their response. He describes them as members of a crooked generation, much as Christ himself had in passages like Luke 9 verse 41 and 11 verse 29.

Devastating judgment will fall upon them before the generation has ended, and it is imperative that they respond while they still can. The response to Peter's message was dramatic and remarkable. Three thousand people responded.

As three thousand had been killed at Sinai, now three thousand are brought to new life. Those who responded to his word were baptised and devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the fellowship of the church, to prayer and to the breaking of bread. In this description we see all of the core elements of the life of the church, baptism leading into a life under the apostolic teaching, fellowship with each other in the body of Christ, most notably in the celebration of the Eucharist, and prayer together.

The baptism of such a large number of people wouldn't have been unreasonable given the very large number of pools within the city of Jerusalem, although I really don't think that we need to presume that all of the baptisms occurred in that single day. The people respond with a sense of fear and awe. It is clear that God is doing something remarkable in their midst, and this is further demonstrated by the many wonders and signs that are being done through the apostles confirming their message.

The original Feast of Pentecost, like the year of Jubilee, had concerns of economic justice near its heart. In Leviticus 23, verses 21-22, Israel was directed to celebrate the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, in a way that has special regard for the poor of the land. In a

similar way, Deuteronomy 16, verses 10-12, underlines the importance of the Feast of Pentecost as a time where the poor were especially recognised.

Pentecost was also a sort of mini-Jubilee. Jubilee was the time when all of the poor of the land were restored to their ancestral properties, the life of the early Jerusalem church, where things were held in common, and rich and poor alike shared in the goodness of God's gifts, was something of a fulfilment of this. As we read further, it seems that this wasn't a denial of private property, so much as a community of common concern.

In having all things in common, they acted like a large or extended family, where individuals might have their own private property, which they were free to dispose of as they wished, but many resources were voluntarily pooled or mutually provided at the points where they were most needed. We should also note the power of selling property in Jerusalem as a prophetic symbol. Jesus had foretold the destruction of Jerusalem within a generation, so his followers liquidated their property.

When thousands of people, in a city of likely well under 100,000 people, did this, the population in general would sit up and start to pay attention. Jerusalem, we must remember, was also uniquely positioned as a city, as a site of frequent pilgrimage for Jews and proselytes, and also a city uniquely situated as a meeting place of East and West, North and South. There were probably 2 to 4 million Jews outside of Palestine at the time, with only about 1 million within it.

The death and resurrection of Christ, and now Pentecost, had occurred around the time of pilgrimage festivals, during which time Jerusalem's population would have swollen with visitors for the feasts. At such times, Jerusalem could be like a dandelion clock, from which new doctrines and movements could fly to all corners of the empire on the four winds of heaven. The early church's practice seemed to have involved regular attendance of the temple, which provided lots of room for congregating as a group, along with meetings in private houses.

Later in Acts 5, verse 12, we see that the disciples regularly met together in the precincts of the temple, in Solomon's portico, which was on the eastern side of the outer court of the temple. Perhaps this location was chosen not merely for reasons of practicality, but also as the site from which the waters of the Spirit were expected to flow, according to the prophecy of Ezekiel chapter 47, verses 1 to 2. The disciples have glad and generous hearts as they receive their food. Common meals had been an important theme throughout the Gospel of Luke, and now in the book of Acts they also retain importance, although an importance that is shaped by new events.

After the resurrection, Jesus had demonstrated that he was alive to his disciples by sharing meals with them. While we typically think of the celebration of the supper in the light of the Last Supper as a memorial of Christ's death, we must also recognise the importance of the breaking of bread as a way in which Christ demonstrated that he was

alive. The celebration of shared meals, of which the breaking of bread was a central element, recalled Christ's presentation of himself as alive to the disciples in the joyful resurrection feasts, those shared meals that occurred between the resurrection and the ascension.

All of this might also make us think of the appropriate character of the covenant people in relationship to the Lord and to their neighbours, in places like Deuteronomy chapter 26. They are a community of joy, of thanksgiving, contentment, generosity, at peace with and honoured by all around. In Luke's Gospel we have a number of formulaic descriptions of the growth of John the Baptist and Jesus as young children.

These follow the pattern of 1 Samuel. Now we can see an example of a corresponding expression for the growth of the Church, which might also recall Old Testament descriptions of the multiplication of Israel's population. A question to consider, how might the early Jerusalem churches' approach to their shared meals and their sharing of possessions be a response to the teaching and example of Christ as it is described in the Gospel of Luke? James chapter 1 But let him ask in faith with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.

For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.

For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass, its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

Let no one say when he is tempted, I am being tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Know this, my beloved brothers. Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror, for he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets, but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

If anyone thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. There are four Jameses mentioned in the New Testament.

James the son of Alphaeus, James the father of Judas, not Iscariot, James the son of Zebedee and the brother of John, who is martyred earlier on in chapter 12 of Acts, and James the brother of Jesus and leader in the early church. Most likely, the author of the book of James is the brother of Jesus. The inclusion of the book in the canon and its authority likely depended upon the authority of the figure that it was associated with, and early testimony consistently points in the direction of the brother of Jesus.

It's a very Jewish book, it's written in a Jewish context, and seemingly to a Jewish audience. When we read it, we should notice a lot of similarities with Jesus' own teaching. Even without explicit allusions, we should notice many parallels with the Sermon on the Mount, for instance.

Chapter 1 opens with James, or rather, Jacob, writing to the twelve tribes. James is our anglicised form of the Hellenised form of the name Jacob. The twelve tribes didn't really exist in the same manner at this point.

In many ways, they had merged into each other, and they are referred to more generally as the Jews. They are scattered among the nations, and he writes to them, presumably from Jerusalem. Are they scattered as those dwelling among the nations, as those who had left Israel and Judith through the exile? Are they scattered through persecution of the early church? Or are they scattered in a more general spiritual sense as aliens and strangers in the world? It's not entirely clear.

I would lean towards seeing it as Jews that lived among the nations, with a special consideration to the Jewish Christians who had left Jerusalem and now lived in various places among the Gentiles. After a brief but typical greeting, James moves into the content of his letter. James can play with words in moving his letter forward.

Here, greetings is followed by a charge concerning joy, a related term. He calls for them to show joy in trials, as such trials test faith in a way that leads to growth towards maturity. Trials have a purpose and a positive intended outcome by the Lord.

They aren't meaningless. James probably has in mind here more general trials, not just



the explicit tribulation and trial that comes upon the church at the appointed time. Trials should produce a steadfastness and fortitude that enables us to stand up to challenge.

As we respond faithfully to trials, we become perfect and complete. We become mature, having all that we need. The goal of trials should be our maturity, that we should grow beyond various areas of lack.

One of the most significant of these forms of lack might be our need for wisdom. The book of James picks up a number of wisdom themes from the Old Testament and also in the New. In scripture, wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord.

It involves insight into God's will for our lives, and at its very heart is the practical skill in the art of living well. If we are to be complete and mature, we will need this sort of thing. God is a generous giver to those who ask good gifts from Him, and wisdom is a primary example of such a gift.

In Matthew 7, verses 7-11, Jesus speaks about God's giving. For everyone who asks, receives, and the one who seeks, finds, and to the one who knocks, it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him? God does not just give generously, He also gives without reproach.

He is not a giver who constantly accuses the recipients of His gifts and makes them feel guilty about receiving them. He is glad to give, and He does so freely. We should consequently approach Him confidently, knowing that He wants to give His good gifts to us.

God more specifically responds to requests given by confident faith. The danger here is of being fickle and lacking determination and confidence in our approach to God. In the Gospels, there are several examples of people having to persist in requests before they are given the healing, or the exorcism, or the deliverance that they are looking for.

Those without faith give up before they receive a positive answer. And however He might seem to be discouraging at first, He wants to give healing, He wants to give deliverance. But faith has to break through.

The person who doubts is unstable and double-minded. He is a man who does not love the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. He is fickle and unreliable.

It is the wholehearted pursuit of the Lord that is promised a blessing, not those who half-heartedly do so, or those who hedge their bets. If we truly seek Him, He will gladly be found by us. James calls for the lowly brother to boast in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation.

There is a sort of a transvaluation of values as some have called it here. Judgment is about to come and while they may seem fortunate to those around, those who are deeply invested in the riches of this age will suffer great loss. As Jesus argues in Luke 6, verses 20-25, Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and spurn your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for behold your reward is great in heaven, for so their fathers did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. There is a form of testing to occur that will come for some with poverty and oppression, with others it will involve the loss of former wealth and status.

And wealth can also produce a sort of double-mindedness, which James has just warned about. Matthew 6, verses 19-21 Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The divided heart, more often than not, is split between the things of this world, between the things that our treasures and our lives and our energies are invested in in this present age, and those things which belong to the age to come, to those things that are of God. Many people say that they want wisdom, but they are not prepared to pay the potential cost of the loss of wealth and status.

Learning to recognise what true riches are, and the fleeting character of earthly wealth, will enable believers to sit much more easily to material conditions, whether they are rich or poor. James is here alluding to the message of the Gospel coming in Isaiah chapter 40, verses 5-8 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. A voice says, Cry! And I said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

The coming of the word of the Lord throws things into sharp relief. We begin to see where true treasures lie, treasures that might cause us to sell everything that we have in order to obtain them, and where things we once most greatly valued are of little and only transitory value. Those who are steadfast are promised a reward from God, the crown of life itself.

This is similar to what is promised in Revelation chapter 2, verse 10. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. God's testing is given with the intent of proving us, so that we will stand the test and be strong and mature.

God may bring us into situations of testing, but he always does so with the purpose of proving and strengthening our faith, not of causing us to fall into sin. God himself is not susceptible to the desire to sin, and he does not encourage this in human beings. Rather, sinful desires arise from our own fallen natures, and those sinful desires give birth to sin, which then matures into death.

Evil desire giving birth to sin, which matures into death, is a comparison to a child being born and growing up. James wants us to see the longer term outcomes of sin. Like the wisdom literature more generally, James wants us to see how sin first begins, and then how it grows and how it moves into maturity.

God, far from being the source of temptation, is the unchanging fount of every good gift. He is the Father of Lights, of the heavenly bodies. But even the heavenly bodies are changeable in ways that he is not.

God is not fickle. God is not changeable. He brought us forth as first fruits of his new creation in Christ by his word.

And we can take confidence in this. If God does not change, then his purpose in calling us and bringing us to birth by his word has not changed. The theme of guarding the tongue and one's spirit is very prominent in the wisdom literature, especially in the Book of Proverbs.

Uncontrolled spirits that erupt in anger do not produce behaviour that is pleasing to God and characteristic of those in right relationship with him. God brought us into our renewed spiritual existence by his word. We must put aside old filthy clothing, as it were, and receive the implanted word in its place.

The word is the main spring of our new life, and we must receive it meekly. This is a continual process. It is not merely a once-off event.

The danger that James recognises is of hearing only and not being changed by the word that we have received. Jesus has warned against the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount. The law is compared to a mirror.

It reveals our character so that we might amend our character and be transformed by it. The law of liberty is associated with the gospel, with the implanted word that can save our souls. However, it is also associated with the law, with the Torah.

The implanted word here might be the law written on the heart, no longer the external tablets of stone, but a word within that transforms the heart by the spirit. This leads to a

transformed relationship with the word on the page. When we read the word of the law now, it should appear to us as liberating, not merely as something that is bringing us into condemnation, judgment and bondage.

True religion of this kind is manifested in the person's mastery of their tongue and their spirit, their concern for the weak and the oppressed, of whom orphans and widows are particularly singled out, and their moral integrity and holiness, keeping themselves unstained from the world. The world is a place of moral pollution and we must be careful how we engage with it. A question to consider, how might we experience the law of God as the law of liberty that James speaks of here?