



## Peter's Sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:22-41)

*Commentary: Week Five*

*\*\*Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.  
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between  
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

### New American Commentary<sup>1</sup>

#### (2) Scriptural Proof Concerning Christ's Messiahship [2:22-36](#)

[Acts 2:22-36](#) is the heart of Peter's sermon. It begins with an introductory summary of God's action in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ (vv. [22-24](#)). A scriptural proof from [Ps 16:8-11](#) then shows that Christ is indeed the expected Messiah, as his resurrection proves (vv. [25-31](#)). A further scriptural proof from [Ps 110:1](#) depicts how the risen Christ is now both Messiah and Lord exalted to the right hand of the Father (vv. [32-36](#)).

Many interpreters feel that these verses incorporate the most primitive form of the Christian kerygma, in which the death of Christ is closely linked to his resurrection. The basic form of this confession is found throughout Acts and runs: "Jesus of Nazareth whom you killed ... but God raised." Here Peter expanded on the basic kerygmatic formula by referring briefly to the earthly ministry of Jesus.

[2:22](#) Jesus is introduced as "Jesus of Nazareth," a designation found frequently in Acts, which merely identifies Jesus by naming his hometown. Jesus is further identified as "a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him" (v. [22](#)). Here perhaps is found a very early Jewish-Christian Christology in which Jesus is depicted as the Messiah-designate. Undue stress should probably not be placed on the term "man," which merely stresses his personhood rather than betraying a primitive adoptionism. The key term is "accredited" (*apodedeigmenon*), a semitechnical term often found in Greek papyri and inscriptions for office holders. It can either be used of those who already hold office or for those who have received appointment but have not yet entered into active service in the office. The latter sense seems to fit the context here. Peter depicted Jesus in his earthly ministry as being designated by God as Messiah but as only entering into the active function of that role upon his death and resurrection.

The proof that Jesus was God's appointed Messiah is to be seen in the "miracles, signs, and wonders" he performed during his earthly ministry. The dominant word is "miracles" (*dynameis*), the "mighty acts" of Jesus, the characteristic term used in the Gospels to depict his miracles. These are further defined as "wonders" (*terata*) and "signs" (*sēmeia*), things that point beyond themselves to a deeper reality. Throughout Acts the term "wonders" only occurs in conjunction with "signs," a testimony to the fact that mere marvels have no value in themselves except as they point beyond themselves to the divine power behind them and so lead to faith. Peter stressed that the Jerusalem Jews should have read the meaning of these signs and recognized Jesus as the appointed Messiah: "You yourselves know these things; you witnessed Jesus' miracles" (author's paraphrase, v. [22b](#)). This portion of Peter's speech

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1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 109-.

established the guilt of the Jewish crowd, put them under conviction, and so led them to repentance and faith.

[2:23](#) Far from seeing in Jesus God's designated Messiah, they rejected him and gave him over to "wicked men" to be crucified (v. [23](#)). All of this was, however, according to God's plan and foreknowledge. Peter carefully balanced the elements of God's divine purposes and the human responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus. In the paradox of divine sovereignty and human freedom, Jesus died as the result of deliberate human decision made in the exercise of their God-given freedom of choice. The Jewish crowd at Pentecost could not avoid their responsibility in Jesus' death. Nonetheless, in the mystery of the divine will, God was working in these events of willful human rebellion to bring about his eternal purposes, bringing out of the tragedy of the cross the triumph of the resurrection. The Jews were not alone in their responsibility for Jesus' death, however. They worked through the agency of "lawless men" ("wicked," NIV), a term used by Jews to designate Gentiles. Jesus died on a Roman cross; Gentiles too shared the guilt. Peter carefully balanced all the participants in the drama of Jesus' death—the guilt of Jew and Gentile alike, the triumphal sovereignty of God.

[2:24](#) Verse [24](#) supplies the second member of the early Christian kerygma. True, humans nailed Jesus to a cross, but God raised him from the dead. This is further defined in an unusual manner: literally, "loosing him from the birth pangs [*ōdinas*] of death" ("freeing him from the agony of death"). "Birth pangs" seems an unusual metaphor to apply to death, and there may be a Hebrew translation variant behind the text here, with an original meaning of "cords, bonds," which would go naturally with loosing: Jesus was loosed from the cords of death that bound him. Still, one could perhaps see some appropriateness in the metaphor of "birth pangs," since resurrection in a real sense is a new birth from death.

[2:25–28](#) Having set forth the basic Christian confession that Jesus is God's appointed Messiah, Peter sought to support this with scriptural proof from [Ps 16:8–11](#). Luke reproduced the psalm exactly as it appears in the Septuagint (vv. [25–28](#)). The attribution of the psalm to David is particularly important in this instance, since its application to Jesus is based on the Davidic descent of the Messiah. Originally the psalm seems to have been a plea of the psalmist that God would vindicate him and that he might escape death and Sheol. Peter applied the psalm messianically, seeing in it a prophecy of David that could not ultimately apply to himself. Verse [27](#) is the key, in which David is seen to have expressed his confidence that he would not be abandoned to the grave, that God would not allow his holy one to suffer decay. The phrases are parallel, both expressing David's hope that God would not abandon him to death. The NIV has wisely translated the Greek word *Hades* as "the grave." The reference is to *Sheol*, the realm of the dead, and thus to death; and this is the sense in which Peter applied it. "Holy One" could apply to David as the anointed king, but for Peter it was even more appropriate as a designation for Christ. Verse [28](#) continues the quotation with v. [11](#) of [Ps 16](#). One wonders why Peter included it since it adds nothing to his argument about the resurrection. Perhaps it was because of the reference to the "paths of life." Christ is the "author of life" (cf. [Acts 3:15](#)), the leader in the path to new life by virtue of his resurrection.

In vv. [29–31](#) Peter applied the psalm to Christ. His reasoning was straightforward. It is well known that David died, so the psalm could not apply to him (v. [29](#)). The psalm is thus a prophecy of David intended for a descendant who would sit on the Davidic throne (v. [30](#)). The psalm applies to Christ, who indeed has risen and is thus the messianic descendant of whom David spoke (v. [31](#)). The psalm is not used to prove the resurrection but rather the messianic status of Jesus. The proof of the resurrection is the eyewitness report of the disciples (v. [32](#)). The psalm depicts David's vision that the Messiah would not be bound by death. Since Christ alone has burst the bonds of death by virtue of his resurrection, then he alone is the Messiah whom David foresaw.

[2:29](#) Some unusual ascriptions are given to David in these verses. “Patriarch” (v. [29](#)) was a term generally reserved for Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his twelve sons; but there is some evidence that by Peter’s day the term had been extended to include David and others. Equally unusual is the inclusion of David among the prophets in v. [30](#), but again there is first-century evidence that the term was occasionally applied to him. The site of David’s tomb mentioned in v. [29](#) is no longer certain but was probably on the south side of the southeast hill of Jerusalem near the pool of Siloam. Josephus said that John Hyrcanus looted the tomb of 3,000 talents of silver during the siege of Jerusalem in 135/134 B.C. and that Herod attempted the same. According to Josephus, Herod’s attempt was thwarted when two of his men were killed by a sudden burst of flame upon entering the tomb. Having second thoughts, Herod abandoned the project and built a white marble portico over the tomb.

[2:30–31](#) Behind the oath referred to in v. [30](#) stands Nathan’s prophecy ([Ps 132:11](#); [2 Sam 7:12–13](#)) that God would establish an eternal kingdom with one of David’s descendants, a prophecy that had come to be understood messianically. Peter’s application of the original Davidic psalm to Christ may seem somewhat strained but was very much in line with Hebrew thought, which saw a close link between individuals and their descendants. The Greek expresses this concept quite graphically with the phrase “from the fruit of his loins” (“one of his descendants,” NIV). Since David died, Peter had to have been speaking of a descendant, a descendant who fulfilled the words of David by not being abandoned in the grave or suffering the decay of death (v. [31](#)). Only one has ever conquered the grave, so David must have foreseen the resurrection of the Messiah. Jesus’ resurrection links him to David’s prophecy. It follows that Jesus is the Messiah.

[2:32–35](#) From resurrection Peter then proceeded to the exaltation of Christ. Christ is indeed the Messiah, for God has raised him, fulfilling the prophecy of David. The proof of Jesus’ resurrection is the eyewitness report of the apostles (v. [32](#)). The exaltation has already been implicitly mentioned by the reference to the enthronement of David’s descendant in v. [30](#). Now it becomes explicit in v. [33](#). God has exalted Christ to his right hand and given him the gift of the Holy Spirit, which has now been poured out. Just as the apostles were witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection, so the Jewish crowd itself was witness to the exaltation of Christ as they had witnessed the gift of the outpoured Spirit at Pentecost. Only the one exalted to God’s right hand can dispense the Spirit.

The Spirit has been poured out, as “you now see and hear.” It follows that the Christ has been exalted. But again Peter used a scriptural proof to back up this assertion, again a psalm of David ([Ps 110:1](#)). The reasoning is much the same as before. David spoke of one being exalted to God’s right hand. David did not ascend into heaven, so he could not have been speaking of himself. It follows, implicitly this time, that David must have spoken of his messianic descendant. The conclusion is the same as before. The outpouring of the Spirit testifies to the ascent of the Messiah since David predicted this ascent. Thus Christ is Messiah.

[Psalm 110:1](#) was a favorite text for the early church. According to [Mark 12:35–37](#), it was first used of the Messiah by Jesus himself to attack the usual political understanding of a Davidic Messiah. It reappears throughout the New Testament, in [1 Cor 15:25](#); [Heb 1:13](#); [10:13](#) and with strong allusions in [Rom 8:34](#); [Eph 1:20, 22](#); [Col 3:1](#); [Heb 1:3](#); [8:1](#); [10:12](#); [12:2](#); [1 Pet 3:22](#). Originally it may have been an enthronement psalm acknowledging the earthly king as God’s representative. For the early Christians it became the basis for the affirmation that Jesus has been exalted to God’s right hand. For Peter it served as a natural transition from the confession of Jesus as Messiah, the dominant concept to this point, to the ultimate confession that Jesus is Lord.

[2:36](#) Verse [36](#) provides the climax to Peter’s sermon and returns full circle to its beginning point, the affirmation of Jesus as Lord (v. [21](#)). In fact, every point to this conclusion of the sermon harks back to its beginning. “God has made this Jesus ... Lord and Christ” is reminiscent of the Messiah-designate language of v. [22](#). “Whom you crucified” returns to the theme of the Jewish guilt in Jesus’ death (v. [23](#)).

Peter's whole use of the psalms had been to establish the messianic status of Jesus for his Jewish audience. Now, with the prompting of [Ps 110:1](#), he moved them to call upon the name that is above every name ([Phil 2:9](#)) and confess Jesus as Lord, leading back to his original text of [Joel 2:32](#).

### **(3) Invitation and Response [2:37–41](#)**

[2:37–39](#) Peter's Jewish crowd got his point. They were guilty of rejecting, even crucifying, the Messiah. Luke said they were "cut to the heart," an uncommon word Homer used to depict horses stamping the earth with their hooves (v. [37](#)). Peter's response was almost programmatic in that he presented them with four essentials of the conversion experience (v. [38](#)): repentance, baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, forgiveness of sins, and receipt of the Spirit. These four generally form a single complex throughout Luke-Acts. They are the normative ingredients of conversion. There is no set, mechanistic pattern by which the various components come into play, particularly baptism and the receipt of the Spirit. The connection of the Spirit with baptism is depicted in various sequences through Acts. Here the Spirit seems to be promised immediately following or as a concomitant of baptism, whereas in [10:44–48](#) the coming of the Spirit seems to have preceded water baptism. The Ethiopian eunuch was baptized, but receipt of the Spirit was not mentioned ([8:38](#)), though his resulting joy was a gift of the Spirit. Baptism and the gift of the Spirit are separated by some interval of time for the Samaritans ([8:12](#), [17](#)). The disciples of John at Ephesus were rebaptized and immediately received the Spirit ([19:5–6](#)). The Spirit cannot be tied down to a set pattern. Clearly, however, both baptism and receipt of the Spirit are normative to the experience of becoming a Christian believer.

*The connection of baptism with the forgiveness of sins in v. [38](#) has often been a matter of controversy. A literal rendering of the verse runs: "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for/on the basis of the forgiveness of your sins." The disputed word is the preposition *eis*, which could indicate purpose and thus be taken to mean that baptism is the prerequisite for the forgiveness of sins. There is ample evidence in the New Testament, however, that *eis* can also mean *on the ground of*, *on the basis of*, which would indicate the opposite relationship—that the forgiveness of sins is the basis, the grounds for being baptized. Perhaps more significant, however, is that the usual connection of the forgiveness of sins in Luke-Acts is with repentance and not with baptism at all (cf. [Luke 24:47](#); [Acts 3:19](#); [5:31](#)). In fact, in no other passage of Acts is baptism presented as bringing about the forgiveness of sins. If not linked with repentance, forgiveness is connected with faith (cf. [10:43](#); [13:38f.](#); [26:18](#)). The dominant idea in [2:38](#) thus seems to be repentance, with the other elements following. Repentance leads to baptism, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Spirit. The essential response Peter called from the Jewish crowd is the complete turnabout that comprises true repentance, to turn away from their rejection of the Messiah and to call upon his name, receive baptism into his community, and share the gift of the Spirit they had just witnessed so powerfully at work in the Christians at Pentecost. Peter concluded his appeal with a promise, the promise of [Joel 2:32](#) (cf. v. [21](#)): "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." The universal scope of the promise is emphasized. Salvation is not only for the group of Jews present at Pentecost but for future generations ("your children") as well. It is not only for Jews but for Gentiles, for those "who are far off."*

[2:40–41](#) Luke's note that Peter warned them "with many other words" was his way of indicating that he had only been able to give a portion of Peter's sermon. His reference to a "corrupt generation" (*skolias*, "crooked, perverse") is Old Testament language for a generation that is stubborn and rebellious and not faithful to God ([Ps 78:8](#); cf. [Deut 32:5](#); [Phil 2:15](#)). The Jews at Pentecost were part of such a generation, a generation that witnessed the coming of the Messiah and rejected him. So Peter's final word was an appeal to "save" themselves from the lot of such a generation. And they were saved; about 3,000 accepted Peter's invitation that day, were baptized, and were added to the 120.