

Preaching in the Last Days

By Phillip G. Kayser · Acts 2:14-21 · 2005-7-17

One of the things I like about the book of Acts is that it confronts not only the status quo passivity that has infected so many churches, but it also confronts the rigid dogmatism found in many circles. And we Reformed people are not exempt from the need for such criticism. In fact, some of the most arrogant claims with regard to what makes good preaching have been made by Reformed people. We are going to begin to look at a sermon given by Peter, and before we examine the content (and we won't even get very far into that), I thought I would at least make a think that their method is the only Biblical way to preach that it is causing division in the PCA and the OPC and in other denominations. And the Scripture gives so much more liberty than many of these people are willing to admit.

And actually, even though these debates have heated up in the last twenty five years, I have found similar debates in the previous generation. For example, Charles Finney looked at the preaching of Jesus, drew some valid conclusions for his own preaching and said (and I quote), "It is the way Jesus Christ preached. And it is the only way to preach." Much as I like Finney's method (and it was a legitimate, Biblical method), it was *not the only way* that Jesus preached. He had variety. And it is certainly not the way that Peter preached in this chapter and the next. We have a constant tendency towards legalism. I've actually asked some of these dogmatists which sermons in the Bible they have based their conclusions on, and they have drawn a blank. They had some theoretical principles of preaching from a book, but they had failed to see if Jesus or the apostles actually follow such expert advice. Jay Adams has done so. John Carrick has done so. But most of the books on preaching that I have read have been far more restrictive than the Bible is. They just don't see the variety. I had a professor of preaching at Westminster Seminary who insisted that his synthetic method was the only legitimate way to preach. Well, you had to use his method or you would flunk, so I learned his method well. And it's a legitimate method. But it's not the only method. Peter didn't follow it. Perhaps the most arrogant claims are those being made by people like James Dennison, Michael Horton, Sidney Greidanus, and others who say that the Redemptive-Historical method of preaching is the only way. Some are so arrogant on their assertions that they don't want to ordain people who hold to different views. And yet the Old and New Testament show a rich diversity of method – even the same preachers using different methods on different occasions – depending upon the material being preached and the goal they had for the hearers.

I'll just give you a tiny glimpse into Peter's method here. Notice in verse 16 that Peter quotes Joel and then applies Joel 2 to what was happening at Pentecost. But Peter does not feel obligated to stick to one text as expository-only people insist. Now don't get me wrong. Expository preaching is by far my favorite, but there are many times (like two of the last three weeks) where I have thought it would be easier for you to understand if I used a different method. And Peter is using a different method here. He comments some on that text, then moves on to Psalm 16 (in verses 25 and following), then appeals to Psalm 132 in verse 30, Psalm

16 again in verse 31, Psalm 68:18 and then to Psalm 110: in verses 34-35. Then he ties back into the text that he started with in Joel 2 when he gets to verse 39. And so this is a thematic sermon that jumps off from a text, but it is not expository. And it's not systematic theology, and it's not synthetic or analytic. So we have just *briefly* looked at *one* thread of Peter's methodology. There are several other points of analysis that could go into understanding how Peter preached. He preached quite differently in chapter 4.

Since you are not seminary students, I won't bore you with the details of this chapter's method of preaching. But if you were to study the methods of preaching used throughout the book of Acts and compare that to the book of Hebrews, which is clearly called a sermon, you will find that the apostles were not good preachers according to the theories of homiletics that are current in many seminaries. But what is even more surprising, if they are right on their theories, Jesus was not a good preacher.

Many Redemptive-Historical-Method advocates absolutely dismiss the textual preaching of Spurgeon, as well as topical, synthetic, doctrinal, expository preaching of Calvin. They say it is unbiblical (because it forces them into the whole scope of biblical inventory. Why? Because they are trying to get people to do something. And my response is that it is too bad that Christ didn't know how to preach. It's too bad that He had so much moralism in the Sermon on the Mount. It's too bad that He had so much doctrine and personal warnings in the Olivet Discourse. It is too bad that Hebrews, which is explicitly called a sermon, would get an F grade in many a modern homiletics class. The author would be accused of going down too many rabbit trails, of being moralistic at places, and of dealing with too many themes – way too many themes.

Then if you start adding Christ's sermons and O.T. sermons, you will find even more diversity. Some are filled with illustrations, while others had none. Some use stories, while others emphasize doctrine. But (so far as I have been able to analyze) all Bible sermons have what Greenville professor John Carrick calls the indicative-imperative mix (which, ironically, most Redemptive historical preachers are opposed to). In the Bible there was always teaching (the indicative) and exhortation to change and apply the teaching (the imperative). You see that in this chapter. You see teaching in verses 14-39 and imperative in verse 40 (which Luke says consisted of many more words). In *some* of the Biblical sermons (like Hebrews) you have the indicative and the imperative all intermixed. Unfortunately, many of the Historical-Redemptive sermons out there have zero application and zero imperative. In fact they mock at it. They say it is unbiblical. It's weird. It's strange. But they aren't the only legalists.

I find it interesting that when Luke wrote Hebrews, instead of having a three point sermon and keeping one theme in mind he had a pile of points. Luke introduced a host of themes in his sermon and a host of practical admonitions. That's a no no. Bryan Chapell has a book on preaching which brings some helpful criticisms of some modern legalisms, but unfortunately he comes up with his own unbiblical rules of preaching that you simply do not find in every Biblical sermon. So if you have been reading critiques of various types of preaching, or if you have read a magazine article that says "the only way to preach is," ask yourself the question: "Do the

Biblical sermons follow this experts advise?" If not, don't buy into his legalism. One of the oft repeated lines that is simply not Biblical is that every passage of Scripture must point to Jesus and the cross. Well, that sounds spiritual, but it is simply not true. In fact that is eisegesis (reading into the text what you want), not exegesis. Now don't get me wrong - I think every *worship service* needs to point to the cross – that's why we have communion every Sunday. But (as John Frame points out) we should not be artificially imposing on a passage what is not there. Let the text preach itself. And there are quite a number of people who do a great job of doing this – far better than me. This is not an apology for my poor preaching. But it is a warning not to buy into everything you read in Reformed magazines.

Now that's a poor way to start a sermon. But let's start going through the passage verse by verse. And let's start with verse 14. (This is going to be one form of expository preaching.)

"But Peter, standing up..." Notice that his preaching was done standing up. But before you think that all preaching has to be done standing up, remember that Jesus taught sitting down in Luke 4:20 and Luke 5:3. He stood to read the text and then sat down to preach it. Some people have made that a moral imperative, and have said that this was always done in Jewish synagogues. And I say, "No. Sitting is allowed, but Peter stood and the preachers in Nehemiah 9 stood. Both are allowed." Beware of legalism. It takes many different forms.

So it says, "But Peter, standing up with the eleven..." This indicated the solidarity of the church leadership with what he said. They backed him up.

Verse 14 goes on "raised his voice and said to them..." The raising of the voice may have been part of his teachings or it may have just been so that all could hear, but the word for "said" conveys a solemnity. Most commentaries point out that "said" is a lame translation. The dictionary says that it means, "to speak seriously, with gravity, a word often used for prophetic, inspired utterance." This highlights the great importance of preaching. It is more than simply an informal sharing. It was representing God to these people. The words indicate that there was an authority in his preaching.

The next phrase, "Men of Judea," refers to residents of Israel "and all who dwell in Jerusalem" is a phrase that means to temporarily dwell there. All these visitors from various countries were said in verse 5 to dwell in Jerusalem (at least during the feast). So this addresses the whole crowd – locals as well as foreign Jews and proselytes.

He says, "Let this be known to you, and heed my words." Now what gave him the right to speak so authoritatively?!! What gave him the right was his office and the fact that he spoke Scripture. This was not his own authority. It was God's authority, and therefore he could demand that people submit to God's Word. It was *not* arrogance. He was simply a spokesperson for God's message. And to this day the only authority that any of us have is the authority of God's Word. But that is an awesome authority, and it often gets preachers into trouble. These apostles end up getting beaten for preaching this way in chapter 4. Preaching is not for the faint hearted. It makes demands that no mortal man would dare to make on his

own. It calls for commitment that requires courage. And it mandates that people listen. How can a preacher do that? Because he represents God to the people, not himself.

In verse 15 he quickly dispenses with the ridiculous claim in verse 13 that they were drunk. "For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day." Since hour one was 6 am on Jewish reckoning, this was 9 am in the morning. The Jewish historian Josephus said that the first meal of the day was not until the fourth hour (7 am)— that would be one hour later, and they gathered in the temple for sacrifice before that meal. The main meal at which people would have their first wine, was four hours later. So in effect what Peter is saying is, "What do you mean? We haven't even had breakfast yet and lunch won't be for another four hours. You're crazy to think that over 100 people are drunk already."

Verse 16: But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "And it shall come to pass in the last days..." Peter is saying that Joel's prophecy had reference to the last days, and that Joel's prophecy was now fulfilled. What's the implication? It is that Peter was living in the last days. He was preaching in the last days. That may come as a surprise to you. But it was well known to the Jews. Ezekiel 38 and Daniel 2 are two passages which indicate that the last days include the conflicts of the Maccabees and the times leading up to the first century AD. They believed that they were living in the last days, and had been for 200 years. There are too many people who automatically apply all last days passages to our time, as if *we* were living in the last days. We are not. They were. They were living in the last days of Israel as a nation; the last days of the temple that Peter was preaching in; the last days of the priesthood, the Old Covenant; the sacrificial system; the ceremonial laws and of almost everything that they were used to. The Jews knew that the last days would profoundly change everything. So I want you to flip with me to several Scriptures which help to clearly define this term. If you don't understand this term "last days" it will mess up your eschatology. If you get that clear in your head, then all kinds of things will fall into place.

Turn first to Hebrews 1:1. This was a sermon which was preached to Jews living in the last days before Jerusalem and temple were destroyed. And in verse 1 Luke says, " God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by the Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things..."

And then verse 3 indicates that Jesus was seated at the right hand of the Father. Verse 5 indicates that Psalm 2 is fulfilled which declares that Messiah would be placed on his throne and would begin the process of subduing all nations to Himself. And then verse 13 quotes Psalm 110, which says, "Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool." All of those things were prophesied to *begin to happen in the last days*. And verse 2 says that Jesus spoke and ministered (past tense) in the last days. That's not something future to us. That's something in the past.

Turn next to 1 Peter 1:20. "He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you..." If the days of Jesus were the last times, then you would expect from Old Testament prophecy that they would lead to the destruction of the old temple and the establishment of a new temple; to the destruction of the old Israel and the

establishment of a new Israel from the remnant. And that's exactly what the next verses go on to say. Chapter 2:4-8 speaks of this new temple made with spiritual stones, with Jesus Himself being the chief cornerstone. Verse 9-10 speaks of the establishing of a new Israel and a new nation. And so yes, these are indeed the last times according to Peter. That's why the Pharisees were so ticked off when He said He was the chief cornerstone. By quoting that passage, Jesus was saying that it was the last days of the beautiful temple they loved so much. They were still building on it and it was only finished shortly before the war that destroyed it.

Turn next to James 5. James is addressing real people living in his own day. And he says, "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you!" [they were about to go through the seven year tribulation of miseries from 66-74 AD] "Your riches are corrupted" [notice that this is an already established condition],

and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days.

[notice the past tense. They had already heaped up treasure in the last days. They were living in the last days. He goes on]

Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

And if you keep reading you see that it is clear that James is talking about people who were alive right then. And yet verse 3 says, "You have heaped up treasure in the last days." The last days is not the time we are living in, but the last days of temple, Israel, priesthood, Old Covenant, etc.

And there are a few other passages that I have collected in a paper that show how every reference to last days is a reference to the days leading up to 70 AD. In 1 Timothy 4 Timothy was told not only that there would be an apostasy in the last times, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, but mentions the doctrines and warns Timothy to avoid them and to instruct the brethren to do so. How could he avoid them if he wasn't living in the last days. In 2 Timothy 3 Paul warns Timothy about deceivers who would come in the last days, lists the doctrines and practices and warns Timothy, "And from such people turn away!" They existed in Timothy's day. Genesis 49 says that the Messiah would arise out of Judah in the last days. That's a reference to His birth. And you can look some time at the other references by asking for my handout.

Now with that as a background, let's go back to Acts 2 and see how the first section of the sermon was both a warning and a glorious promise. Peter was preaching in the last days. First came the promise. "And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh;" This pouring out of the Spirit was not only a fulfillment of the prophecy in Joel, but was the baptism of the Spirit promised by John the Baptist. And in a couple of weeks, Lord willing, we are going to be seeing what a glorious promise this baptism of the Spirit was.

But I do want you to notice God's mode of baptism is not by immersion, but by pouring. He says, "I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh." Now we do try to be flexible and not legalistic. For water baptism we accept immersion. Even though it is irregular, it is valid. I was immersed. But I do not think it is the best mode, because water baptism should point to Spirit baptism. Look again at chapter 1:5. "for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." Water baptism symbolizes Spirit baptism. And what mode of baptism did God use? Look at chapter 1:8. "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has *come upon you*..." The action is with the Spirit, not with the person moving down into the Spirit. We baptize with pouring to symbolize the fact that we are not saved by our actions or our works, but by grace alone; by *God's* action. Salvation is monergistic. It is a beautiful symbolism. Look at chapter 2:3. This is the baptism with fire. "Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat *upon* each of them." They weren't thrown down into the fire. It came upon them, upon their heads. Look at Acts 2:33. "Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear." He poured out the Spirit just as we pour out the water upon the heads of new converts and their families. Look at chapter 10:44. "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit" [notice this]

fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit

[notice this] "*had been poured out* on the Gentiles also." Then look at verse 47. "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." Water baptism should be parallel to Spirit baptism. The word "forbid water" means to "hold back water." The Greek indicates that the water is doing the movement towards the person. And all of that was a symbol that salvation is all of grace. No one deserves it. NO one earns it. It is given. By the way, the Jewish mode of baptism by pouring or sprinkling also clears that. There is an entire Baptist denomination that has left immersion and now practices pouring.

And Acts 2:17 says that God will pour out the Spirit on all flesh. That doesn't mean that unbelievers will be baptized. It is all without distinction, not all without exception, because later he says that they have to believe. But men and women, older and younger, slaves and free, Gentiles and Jews – all flesh will receive this baptism of the Spirit.

Then comes the establishment of a prophetic band. I'm not going to go into that because we spent a lot of time on this earlier. we looked at the formation of the foundation for the church And Ephesians 2 says that the foundation is a revelational foundation made up of apostles, prophets and Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone. And so there is a wealth of revelation that God gives at the foundation of this new Israel – the church. And so verse 17 goes on to say:

your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy.

In which days is "those days" referring to? Well, verse 17 makes it clear that it is in the last days of the Old Covenant; the last days that Joel was referring to. What is the terminous of those last days? Verses 19-21 talks about the terminous being the judgment of God upon Israel in 70 AD. And we will look at that in a bit. But even before we get there, I hope you remember that we spent an entire sermon showing how inspired revelation was entirely finished by 70 AD and that Isaiah 8, Daniel 9 and other passages made this unmistakably clear. They prophesied that before Jerusalem was destroyed, before its temple was burned, and before its people were exiled, that all vision and all prophets would be sealed up and closed off and no more new revelation would be given. That's why 1 Corinthians 13:8 says, "whether there are prophecies, they will cease." And if you want the proofs that I gave, you will have to listen to that sermon. We spent a long time on that subject – very important for understanding Acts.

Now it's important that you not think that we have been gipped. We have the full prophetic word contained in these pages. That revelation continues to be the foundation for our life. Those prophecies continue to speak to us through the Bible. So even though we are not in the last days of the previous age, the foundation for our age has been preserved in God's Word and it gives to us (as Peter words it) "all things that pertain to life and godliness." Or as Paul worded it in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, it is sufficient to make the man of God "complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." So this was an incredible, incredible gift of God's Spirit: the gift of foundational revelation. And what they wrote down in the Bible is all that we need to carry us through this age.

But (as I said) every passage that I referenced in that sermon explicitly mentioned that prophecy would cease when Israel was cast away in 70 AD. And that's hinted at in this passage too. So I want to take a look at verses 19-21, Many people assume that this passage has to be a reference to the last day of history. But at the last day of history there won't be time to repent according to Scripture. Yet verse 21 indicates that there will still be time to repent and be saved during this day of the Lord, whatever *it* is. In fact, the very next verses in Joel show a long time of history after this day of the Lord. Let's read verses 19-21.

I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.

So you have signs before the day of the Lord. Then you have the day of the Lord. And then you have the universal spread of the Gospel to Gentiles – to "whoever." And Joel goes on to expound upon that third stage hugely.

Before we start looking at the miracles, signs and wonders that led up to the destruction of Jerusalem, let me help you to see that the term Day of the Lord was used with reference to many judgments of God in history – against Israel, against Babylon, Egypt, Edom, etc. - this one being *the* day of the Lord for Jerusalem – the people Peter was speaking to. Turn first of all to Isaiah 13. Here is a passage which virtually all scholars agree was fulfilled hundreds of years before Christ. For example, Premillennialist J. Barton Payne says, "Fulfillment... in the fall of

Babylon to the Medes and Persians, in 539 B.C." (p. 301).. Look at Isaiah 13:1. "The burden against Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw." Then he speaks of an imminent judgment against them. Look for example at verse 6. "Wait, for the day of the LORD is at hand! It will come as destruction from the Almighty." Today, in the year 2005 we are almost 2600 years later. I think on any measurement of time it would be hard to say that a judgment future to us could be said to be "at hand" for Isaiah. It is simply not true to say that "the day of the Lord" is always a reference to the last day of history. It is a reference to any judgment of God.

Someone might hypothesize that maybe the Second Coming could somehow be said to be imminent in the Old Testament (imminent means could happen any time). But that is impossible because Jesus had to be born and die before he could have a second coming. And if anything had to prophetically happen before the Second Coming, it is by definition not imminent. And so, most amils, postmils and premils agree that this chapter was speaking about a day of the Lord in the past. Yet look at the apocalyptic language that was used to describe this destruction of Babylon by the Medes in verses 9-10.

Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with both wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; and He will destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be darkened in its going forth, and the moon will not cause its light to shine.

Did that literally happen? Well, perhaps yes, but whether you take it literally or symbolically, it had to have happened in 539 B.C. Verse 13 is similar. "Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth will move out of her place, in the wrath of the LORD of hosts." Yet look at who God uses to bring this cataclysmic judgment that shakes heaven and earth. It's the Medes in verse 17. The Median kingdom itself was so thoroughly obliterated by another day of the Lord, that liberals questioned their existence until archeology discovered a whole empire of the Medes.

I won't look at all 26 times that this phrase occurs, but let's look at one more. Turn to Jeremiah 46:2. This prophecy spans from verse 2 to verse 12. And I want you to notice that he clearly identifies who the judgment is going to be against. Jeremiah 46:2.

Against Egypt. Concerning the army of Pharaoh Necho, king of Egypt, which was by the River Euphrates in Charchemish, and which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon defeated in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah:

Now look at how he describes this judgment of God in verse 10. "For this is the day of the LORD GOD of hosts, a day of vengeance." The capture of Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar is "the day of the Lord" because it was God's judgment on Egypt.

And there are many other examples that could be given. Ezekiel 30 says to Egypt: "Wail, 'Woe to the day!' for the day is near, even the day of the LORD is near;" and conservatives argue that this was fulfilled in their overthrow on Babylon.

I won't give any more background, but the term "the day of the Lord" refers more frequently to judgments in history than it does to the end of time. And interestingly, apocalyptic language

that is identical to what we see in Acts 2 is used to describe the falls of Israel, Babylon, Egypt, Edom and other countries in the Old Testament.

So with that as a background, let's look at Acts 2:19-21 First of all, God says, "I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath..." Did that happen in the next 40 years? Yes. There were an amazing number of signs. There had already been some wonders that the Lord did 50 days earlier at the crucifixion – with three hours of darkness all over the world, an earthquake, saints rising from the dead, the splitting of the temple curtain from top to bottom. And of course Christ and the apostles were doing all kinds of miracles.

But during the next forty years there would be one sign after another, both miraculous and non-miraculous. Let me first quickly list the ones that can be scientifically explained, and then I will spend a bit more time on the signs that cannot be scientifically explained – which are miraculous. Jews saw the appearance of comets and eclipses as being significant. Even though they were able to predict some of these, they still saw those as being signs. And there were remarkable, very visible comets (like Halley's comet) in AD 39, 54, 60,64,65,66, a very rare comet and eclipse pairing in 69 AD and a rare pairing of a solar and lunar eclipse in 71 AD which the Roman Governor Pliny said occurred within 15 days of each other. ^[1]

But the Scripture probably had miraculous signs in mind. And the Roman, Greek and Jewish historians who wrote of that era all record incredible miracles that scared the people out of their wits and made them wonder what was going on. I won't have time to give you all the signs that occurred, but let me give you six that occurred in the half year before the war started. And I'll start with the Jewish historian, Josephus.

Josephus was a priest and a general in the Jewish armies that fought against Rome. He was captured, and his life spared. For the duration of the war he was allowed to ride with the Roman General and to record a history of everything that was happening. Josephus speaks of numerous (what he calls) "manifest portents." (Wars 6:288). I have the references to each of these signs and miracles in my notes, if you are interested.

The First Sign was in 66 AD

In 66 AD, Josephus records two things that happened simultaneously. He says,

"So it was when a star resembling a sword, stood over the city" [Jerusalem] "and a comet which continued for a year." (Wars 6:289). There aren't comets which continue for a whole year (and Josephus knew it), and there aren't stars which look a sword. So Josephus calls these things signs or miracles.

The Second Sign occurred in the same year – 66 AD

Josephus said, "So again when, before the revolt and the commotion that led to war, at the time when the people were assembling for the feast of unleavened bread, on the eighth of the month Xanthieus" [Nisan]", at the ninth hour of the night" [3 a.m.] ".... so brilliant a light shown round the" [holy] "altar and the sanctuary" [of the temple] "that it seemed to be broad

daylight; and this continued for half an hour." (Wars 6:290)" [And by the way, the place that he mentions this happening would have been clearly visible from the Mount of Olives where many people would be camping. So there would have been hundreds of thousands of witnesses. He goes on...] ""By the inexperienced this was regarded as a good omen, but by the sacred scribes it was at once interpreted in accordance with after" [later] "events." (Wars 6:291–292)" and he is there referring to the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Third Sign occurred six days after sign two.

At the feast of Passover, six days later after the great light shone in the temple, Josephus says:

""The eastern gate of the inner court — it was of brass and very massive, and, when closed towards evening, could scarcely be moved by 20 men; fastened with iron-bound bars" [on each side], "it had bolts which were sunk to a great depth into a threshold consisting of a solid block of stone — this gate was observed at the sixth hour of the night" [midnight] "to have opened of its own accord. The watchmen of the temple ran and reported the matter to the captain, and he came up and with difficulty succeeded in shutting it... This again to the uninitiated seemed the best of omens, as they supposed that God had opened to them the gate of blessings."
(Wars 6:293–29)

The fourth Sign occurred a few days later

Josephus says,

Again, not many days after that festival on the twenty-first of Artemisium, there appeared a miraculous phenomenon, passing belief. Indeed, what I am about to relate would, I imagine, have been deemed a fable, were it not for the narratives of eyewitnesses and for the subsequent calamities which deserved to be so signalized. For before sunset throughout all parts of the country

[of Judea] "chariots were seen in the air and armed battalions hurtling through the clouds and encompassing the cities." (Wars 6:297-299)" According to Josephus, this was not a sign seen by just a few quacks, but the whole countryside saw it. In fact, the Romans saw this multitude of angelic armies in the air as well. Let me quote from the Roman historian Tacitus – a very well-respected historian. He said,

"13. In the sky appeared a vision of armies in conflict, of glittering armour. A sudden lightning flash from the clouds lit up the Temple." (*Histories*, Book 5, v. 13). Christ was indeed directing His armies against this city just as He promised. So Josephus reported this wonder in heaven, the Roman historian reported it...

A third ancient witness who had access to first century documents was Eusebius, the church historian. And he gave a couple of details that the others did not. He said, "For before the setting of the sun chariots and armed troops were seen throughout the whole region in mid-air, wheeling through the clouds and encircling the cities" (*Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, **Book 3, Ch. 8****)."

So that was a fourth sign that the Lord gave in the heavens.

The Fifth Sign occurred two weeks later.

So God was piling sign upon sign during those last day. Josephus says, "Moreover, at the feast which is called Pentecost the priests [and in context of the quote, there were 24 priests who were witnesses: "the priests"] on entering the inner court of the Temple by night as their custom was in the discharge of their ministrations, reported that they were conscious, first of a commotion and a din [a great noise], and after that of a voice as of a host [an army], 'We are departing hence [from here]." (Wars 6:299-300)

Interestingly, the Jewish Mishna also records the same event from a Jewish perspective and says that this was when the glory cloud left the temple. Anyway, Josephus said it sounded like an army. And it occurred on Pentecost, exactly 36 years to the day after Peter preached this sermon.

Now we do have a third ancient witness for this sign as well. The Roman historian Tacitus says almost exactly the same thing as Josephus. He ties it together with the previous sign (whereas Josephus says that there was a two week gap). Otherwise, they report the same thing. Tacitus reports, "In the sky appeared a vision of armies in conflict, of glittering armour. A sudden lightning flash from the clouds lit up the Temple. The doors of the holy place abruptly opened, a superhuman voice was heard to declare that the gods were leaving it, and in the same instant came the rushing tumult of their departure. Few people placed sinister interpretation upon this. The majority were convinced that the ancient scriptures of their priests alluded to the present as the very time when the Orient would triumph and from Judaea would go forth men destined to rule the world." (*Histories*, Book 5, v. 13). And so they were ignoring these signs of God.

Josephus and three Roman historians mention other amazing signs, one of which is so bizarre that people have a hard time believing it: that in the temple, just before a cow was to be sacrificed, it gave birth to a lamb. I even have a hard time believing that one. But there were a lot of witnesses who saw the same thing. I'll mention a couple of other miraculous signs under the next phrases in our passage, but I won't bore you with all the signs that they give. Here is the conclusion that Josephus, the Jewish historian drew from all these signs that God gave in heaven and in earth. He said, "Reflecting on these things one will find that God has a care for men, and by all kinds of premonitory signs shows His people the way of salvation, while they owe their destruction to [their own] folly and calamities of their own choosing." (*Wars 6:309–311*)

Let's move on to the next phrase in verse 19.

The next phrase says, "blood and fire and vapor of smoke."

I think all of you are familiar with the absolute carnage that happened in the seven year war against Jerusalem. There were over two million people killed, but the tribulation went well

beyond how many were killed. If you read Josephus, it was truly worse than anything you have ever heard of. Was there blood and fire and vapor and smoke? Absolutely yes. The smoke was so thick at times it blotted out everything. There were so many bodies in the sea of Galilee that you couldn't see the water for all the floating bodies. It was worse than Rwanda. It was worse than Cambodia. Lakes were filled with bodies like a log jam everywhere. So many bodies had been dumped into the Jordan River, that its whole length was blood red. Very literally there was blood up to the horses bridles for one thousand six hundred furlongs. The Jewish historian Josephus said, "Galilee was all over filled with fire and blood." The same was said of Jerusalem.

But this too may be a reference to a miraculous sign. Though the text here doesn't demand it, it may be referring to the same falling of blood and fire out of heaven that Revelation 8:7 speaks about. That prophecy said, "and hail and fire followed, mingled with blood and they were thrown to the earth." As puzzling as this is, ancient historians make reference to blood falling from heaven. According to Fenton Farrar, the Roman historian Dion Cassius reported that blood and fire fell from heaven on Jerusalem in 68 AD. Nor was this the only occasion in which this happened. Dion Cassius mentions other times. In Livy's history of Rome, book 42 it mentions a similar time when it was raining blood for three days.^[21] And I read an article by a secular scientist who said that the references to blood falling from heaven are so frequent that they cannot be denied. He tried to explain it away as red dust coming down together with rain and making the rivers blood red. Others have tried to explain it like the blood red snow or rain that has come down in Naples, Italy and other places as rain or snow infused with lichen-infusoria or *Oscillatoria Rubescens*. The American Scientist says, "Many of the tales of the descent of showers of blood from the clouds which are so common in old chronicles, depends, says Mr. Berkeley, the mycologist, upon the multitudinous production of infusorial insects or some of the lower algae. To this category belongs the phenomenon known under the name of "red snow."" But whatever the cause, whether Revelation is describing real blood or blood like rain, it would be unnerving to say the least. But it failed to get Israel's attention, other than a remnant.

At one point during the war Josephus said, "The hill on which the temple stood was seething hot, and seemed enveloped to its base in one sheet of flame. The blood was larger in quantity than the fire, and those that were slain more in number than those that slew them. The ground was nowhere visible. All was covered with corpses; over these heaps the soldiers pursued the fugitives." (*B. J.*, VI. 5, 1.) It was a horrible war. But no one could say that God had not warned them time and again.

Look next at verse 20:

"The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood"

I agree with commentaries that this was symbolic language to show the overthrow of Israel. But that doesn't mean it can't be literal too. The Rock that Moses struck in the wilderness was symbolic of Jesus being struck in judgment by God so that we could have the Spirit. But there was still a literal rock and literal water that flowed out of it. The ten plagues God sent on Egypt were symbolic of God's triumph over the gods of Egypt, but there was still a literal background

to those symbols. And I believe that God frequently (if not always) brings signs in connection with the overthrow of major nations. You can find secular testimony to weird things in the sky and earth prior to those things. There are certainly many such references in the ancient books. And the same was true of this war. Even the most careful of historiographers of the time make mention of the extinguished sun and the blood red moon.

The Roman historian Tacitus, in recounting this time, said, "Suddenly *in a clear sky the moon's radiance seemed to die away*. This the soldiers in their ignorance of the cause regarded as an omen of their condition, comparing the failure of her light to their own efforts, and imagining that their attempts would end prosperously should her brightness and splendour be restored to the goddess. And so they raised a din with brazen instruments and the combined notes of trumpets and horns..." (Annals)

Tacitus again: "There occurred too a thick succession of portents... [he then lists some of these miracles and one of them was:] Then the sun was suddenly darkened and the fourteen districts of the city were struck by lightning." (Annals)

Of course, Verse 20 says that the sun turning dark and the moon turning blood red had to occur before the war. This was a warning, right? And there are historical examples of this. Luke 23:34 tells us that from noon till three o'clock in the afternoon on the day that Jesus was crucified, it was pitch dark over the whole earth. That wasn't any eclipse. Three hours of darkness was a wonder in the heavens. Those who were listening to Peter's sermon probably would have had that event burned into their minds since that had happened only 50 days earlier. NO one could ignore a three hour darkness like this.

And it is interesting that pagan writers refer to this event. Thallus refers to a darkening of the sun during this period like no other. He calls it an eclipse, but Julius Africanus disagrees and says that no eclipse had ever darkened the sun for so long. Phlegon calls it an eclipse, but acknowledges that there was nothing like it that had ever happened before. In his Olympiades, fragment 17, he said, "In the fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad, an eclipse of the Sun took place greater than any previously known, and night came on at the sixth hour of the day" [the sixth hour is noon], "so that stars actually appeared in the sky; and a great earthquake took place in Bithynia and overthrew the greater part of Niceaea."^[2] For stars to actually appear in the sky means that this was no ordinary eclipse. *It was dark*. This also rules out an overcast day, or locusts, or other things that would obscure the sky. The sun was darkened, but the stars came out at noon.

Dion Cassius records a great many miraculous signs that took place in 45 AD, including a blotting out of the sun.

The Greek philosopher and biographer Plutarch wrote about something extremely unusual during this war. If it was an eclipse (which one scientific article that I read claims that it is, but which I doubt), then it took place in 71 AD. If it was not an eclipse, it probably happened a bit earlier. But here is what the Greek writer, Plutarch said, ""You will if you call to mind this conjunction recently which, beginning just after noonday, made many stars shine out from

many parts of the sky..."" Man that would be dark for stars to shine at noonday! He cites ""Minnermus and Cydias, Archilochus and Stesichorus besides, and Pindar, who [spoke of] "midday night falling."""^[4] And I got that from the Encyclopedia Britannica. So, there was another clear darkening of the sun so thoroughly that the stars could clearly be seen. And he lists many scholars who say the same thing. All that was within one generation of Peter's sermon.

On the phrase, "the moon turned into blood," not even pre-millennialists believe that the moon rock itself turns from stone to literal blood. I have heard premils speak of a war on the moon with so much blood spilled that it turned it red. But that is not the planet literally turning into blood. If that ever happens, that would be blood *on* the moon. So even most premils do not take this literally. This is simply a reference to the blood red color of the moon that was reported by historians.

Verse 20 says that all this was ""Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD." This was a worse judgment than any Israelite had ever seen before. It was truly a great and awesome day of the Lord. And in God's kindness He had sent Jesus to warn about it, and the apostles to warn about it and call the people to repent. He had sent many signs and wonders to warn about it.

So verse 21 ends by saying, "And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." Notice the word "whoever." This marked the end of the time when Israel would be God's chosen people and the beginning of the unbelievable expansion of the kingdom worldwide. Joel speaks of that expansion among the Gentiles, and specifically talks about the change from remnant to many. The rest of the verse that is not quoted in Acts 2 says,

And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, as the LORD has said,

[get this phrase] "among the remnant whom the LORD calls." There would only be a remnant from among the Jews who would listen to this message of Peter. And thus the symbolism of tongues. The primary beneficiaries would be the Gentiles. And more and more Gentiles would come to faith until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. At that point, still future to us, all Israel will be saved. But Peter's message was a sobering wake up call to Israel that they needed to repent and believe in Christ or they would be cast off as a nation until the time of the Gentiles was fulfilled.

Let me end with three lessons.

The first lesson is that God continues to deal with nations. The judgment of Israel in 70 AD comes *after the cross*. There are so many people who insist that once the New Covenant was ushered in, that God is not interested in what nations do. They turn Christianity into an individualistic, pietistic religion. They say that we shouldn't worry about nations, politics and the kingdoms of this world. But this passage puts the lie to that viewpoint. Israel's judgment was after the cross, and it stands as a warning to any nation today who continues to ignore God's mercies and continues to flaunt its sin. Don't think that America is exempt from

judgment. I am surprised at how many Christians are just not worried about judgement in America. They think "Oh, there are so many serious Christians that God wouldn't judge us." But there was a sizable remnant of Jews in Acts who were Christians too. In fact they were a whole lot more committed. Every argument that could be used as to why we shouldn't be judged could be used back at them. Unless America embraces the message of verses 17-18, verses 19-21 could well describe our own nation. God continues to deal with nations and national sins after the cross.

Second, God wants our preaching to include addresses to nations. The passage Peter picks from Joel is a call not only to Israel, but to the nations that would exist under the New Covenant. The next two verses after the ones that Peter quotes say this: "I will also gather *all nations* and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; and I will enter into judgment with them there on account of My people, My heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations." Later he says, "Let the nations be wakened, and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations." He speaks of "multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision!" They are called to make decisions. They are preached to. And is that not what the Great Commission commands us to do: to preach to nations and to disciple all nations? God's message was not just to Israel, but to New Covenant nations as well. This means we should never lose hope. Don't take the attitude that things are so far gone that it is hopeless. Peter still held onto hope.

Third, what is true of nations is also true of individuals. Apart from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, all of us would face certain judgment in eternity. We deserve judgment every bit as much as Israel did. We cannot escape through our own good works. We can only escape by trusting in the finished work of Jesus Christ our Lord, as Peter will go on to say in his sermon. So take verse 21 seriously, and if you have not put your trust in the Lord, call on the name of the Lord and be saved. Amen. Let's pray.

"The Last Days": How Does Scripture Use This Phrase?*

Every reference to "last days" in the Bible refers to the time period of foreign domination of Israel that *culminates* in Israel's destruction as a nation in 70 A.D. These are the last days of Israel, temple, sacrifices, priesthood, Old Covenant, typological law, etc. Thus, Hebrews uses the present tense when it says "**Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away**" (Heb. 8:13.) The final "shaking" and evidence of the new kingdom was to be the destruction of Jerusalem (Heb. 12:25-29 with Haggai 2:6). Notice how consistently the following Scriptures place "the last days" in the period leading up to 70 AD

a. **Hebrews 1:1** "God who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has *in these last days* spoken to us by His Son." Christ's ministry was in the last days.

b. **Acts 2:16-17** "But *this is what was spoken* by the prophet Joel: 'And it shall come to pass *in the last days*, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh . . ." Peter lived in the last days.

c. **1 Peter 1:20** "He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest *in these last times* for you." This indicates that Christ was born and lived in the last times.

d. **James 5:3** James, while rebuking the rich Jews who were persecuting the Jewish Christians, predicts the destruction of their gold in 67-70 AD. In the middle of his denunciation he says, "Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped [notice the past tense, they have already done it] up treasure in the last days." (5:3)

e. **Genesis 49:1** "And Jacob called his sons and said, 'Gather together, that I may tell you what shall befall you in the last days.'" Notice that in the middle of his description of last days events he includes the fact that Shiloh (or Christ) would come in verse 10. And all commentators agree that this is referring to Jesus. When did Shiloh come? He came 2000 years ago in the last days of the Old Age and of the Old Covenant.

f. **Numbers 24:14**. "And now, indeed, I am going to my people. Come, I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the last days." This whole vision is dealing with the time between Christ's first coming and 70 AD when there was an unbelievable number of wars, overthrowing of governments, famines, earthquakes and pestilences. But I just want to refer you to one verse that clearly establishes the time period. Verse 17 "I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; [that is just another way of saying that this is the latter days. They were latter days from an Old Covenant Perspective, not from our perspective.] A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter shall rise out of Israel." This is clearly referring to the birth of Jesus, because it was at Christ's birth that He arises out of Israel." At the Second Coming Christ will not arise out of Israel, but will come from heaven. Thus, Christ's birth is a "last days" event.

g. **Deuteronomy 31:29** "For I know that after my death you will become corrupt, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you *in the latter days*, because you will do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger through the work of your hands." While commentators differ on exactly which judgment upon Israel this speaks to, it fits either the Babylonian exile or 70 AD.

h. **Ezekiel 38:14-16** "Therefore, son of man, prophesy and say to God, 'Thus says the Lord God: 'On that day when My people Israel dwell safely, will you not know it? Then you will come from your place out of the far north, you and many peoples with you, all of them riding on horses, a great company and a mighty army. You will come up against My people Israel like a cloud, to cover the land. It will be *in the latter days* that I will bring you against My land, so that the nations may know Me, when I am hallowed in you, O Gog, before their eyes" The time reference for this prophecy is the Maccabean war (166-142 BC). It can't refer to future because 1) nations still have a memory of Israel's exile that needs to be corrected (39:23-24), 2) weapons are made of wood and include large and small shields, bows, arrows, war clubs, spears (38:5; 39:3,9-10) in such abundance that they are used for fuel for 7 years (39:9-10), 3) technology is poor - seven months to bury the dead (39:12-16), they ride horses, use wood for fuel, etc. Clearly this was prior to 70 AD, and yet it was "last days." Again, proof that last days means last days of the Old Covenant.

i. **Daniel 2:28** "But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days." In Daniel's interpretation we see that the image symbolized kingdoms beginning with Nebuchadnezzar right then and ending in the fourth kingdom which is Rome. And if you are to take the historical sequence at all seriously then you will find that Christ's first coming is spoken of as being "in the last days."

The following passages are often interpreted as if the "last days" refers to a period of time at the end of the world. But the *context* of the following texts show that they were already in the last days, though the last days events would intensify in the coming years before 70 AD as apostasy intensified. Thus these passages do not contradict our thesis, but reinforce it.

j. **1 Timothy 4:1** "...in the latter times some will depart from the faith" and he goes on to describe their doctrines and describes precisely the apostasy that happened in the years prior to 70 AD. This was not just doctrine that would happen 2000 years from them, but something that related to their conduct. Timothy was to instruct the brethren in these things (v. 6), to reject the false doctrine (vv. 7ff.) and to *command* and teach these things (v. 10). If they were to command the things related to the latter times, then obviously there was an immediate bearing in their lives. Paul explains more of what he meant by latter day apostasy in 2 Tim. 3:

k. **2 Timothy 3:1** "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come, men will be lovers of themselves [etc.]" In verse 5 Paul tells Timothy to turn away from them. If this is describing people at the second coming, how could Timothy turn away from them? In verses 7-8 he describes them in the *present tense*. "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith." And then in verse 9 he encourages Timothy by showing that this apostasy will not be something that will last for all time (he is talking only about the last days of the Old Covenant up to 70 AD, though of course the principles can be applied to any age): "but they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all."

l. **2 Peter 3:3** "Knowing this first, that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts . . . [in verse 5 he describes them further saying] For this they are deliberately forgetting [present tense. I.e., Peter is talking about people already in existence. Thus he was in the last days, though of course they would get worse in the years to come.]

m. **Jude 8-19** He tells the church that they should not be surprised at all of the apostates and false teachers. He describes in the *present tense* false teachers who had crept into the church. In verse 12 he says, "These are [present tense] spots in your love feasts." He tells them in verse 17, "But you beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; how they told you that there would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts. [i.e., Don't be surprised by this] These are sensual persons, who cause divisions, not having the Spirit." (vv. 17-19) Christ had prophesied in Luke 21 and Matthew 24 that such false teachers would arise, and the other apostles had prophesied the same things would occur in the last times before the end of Jerusalem and the end of the age (translated wrongly by KJV as "world" occasionally.)

n. **1 John 2:18-19** "Little children, it is [present tense] the last hour [i.e., it was the midnight hour for Jerusalem and the Old Covenant people before judgment day came on the Jews in 70 AD]; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, *even now* many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us . . ." The many antichrists that had already arisen were evidence that the last hour was here and that the Antichrist was at the doors.

1. Pliny's Natural History (Book II, X. 57) "For the eclipse of both sun and moon within 15 days of each other has occurred even in our time, in the year of the third consulship of the elder Emperor Vespasian" which is the year 71 AD (LCL 330, 207. [↗](#))
2. "It was reported that showers of blood had been falling for three days at Saturnia" (42:20). "In the precincts of the temple of Vulcan and Concord there was a rain of blood" (40:19) [↗](#)
3. Quoted in *Historical Eclipses and Earth's Rotation* , by F Richard Stephenson, Cambridge University Press, 1997, page 359. [↗](#)
4. From: Plutarch, Greek philosopher and biographer, *The Face of the Moon* , Quoted in *Historical Eclipses and Earth's Rotation* , by F Richard Stephenson, Cambridge University Press, 1997, page 360, and, in part, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica CD 98*. [↗](#)