

“Crucial Questions for Such a Time as This: What Does this Mean?”

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Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

- Acts 2: 5-17

“You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.”

- Acts 2: 22-24

“This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are 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 both see and hear. 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.”’ Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

- Acts 2: 32-36

The Pentecost narrative is a familiar one to a number of us who are members of the church. Pentecost was one of the major holidays and observances of the Judaic faith. It occurred fifty days after the celebration of Passover, which was another major Jewish festival. On the Day of Pentecost the members of the early church gathered in one place were also on one accord. Suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind that filled the house where they were assembled. There appeared to them cloven or divided tongues of fire that rested on each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages or tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Not as they gave themselves, not as they mimicked each other, not as they repeated what they saw or heard others saying or doing, and not as they allowed others to tell them that unless they spoke in other languages or tongue, then their baptism in the Holy Spirit was not valid, did they speak in those languages or tongues. Rather, only as, only when, and only as long as the Holy Spirit directed them personally in that context did they speak or deliver the message they received from heaven.

The church was so full of praise when the power from heaven fell upon them, that people passing by on the outside heard them and were drawn to where the believers were gathered because of what was happening on the inside. People are always drawn to a church where and when they perceive something significant is happening on the inside. When members of a church go out into the community and talk positively about their church, their pastor, and their ministries and programs, outsiders will be drawn to it because they want to see what's happening on the inside. I have never seen a church grow when members either talk it down, their pastor down, or their fellow parishioners down. I have never seen a church grow when people are apathetic and angry and evil and envious regarding their leadership or about each other. I have never seen a church grow when the membership have an "us" and a "those people" attitude toward each other. There is enough ugliness in the world; people are not interested in belonging to a church of mean people with ugly attitudes and warring and disagreeable spirits. When church members have a smile rather than a scowl or a frown, and gratitude rather than gripes; when members have genuine joy with faces that light up when they speak, outsiders must conclude that something worthwhile must be happening on the inside.

When a church has activity throughout the week even when the building is closed on Sunday; when lights burn in a church throughout the week, even when the building is closed on Sunday; when people are seen going in and out of a church throughout the week, even when the building is closed on Sunday, outsiders will know that something worthwhile is happening on the inside. No one wants to go any place where nothing is happening, other than church people who are more concerned about their tradition and looking back to how it used to be, rather than renewal or revival. If a church is to grow then something significant must be happening on the inside, and people on the outside take notice.

What applies to the church also has implications for those of us who belong to it. When we church members live in such a way that the beauty of Jesus can be seen in our lives, outsiders will know that something worthwhile is happening on the inside. When those who know us before we joined the church or became deep in the Lord, can recognize that nobody but the Lord has made a change in our lives, they will know that something worthwhile has been happening on the inside.

When the Holy Spirit descended upon the church, the activity in the upper room caused those on the outside to take notice. As they stood on the outside and heard the rejoicing in the upper room they marveled at what they heard. Those on the outside knew that those on the inside were Galileans as they listened to their accents. As we can sometimes tell a person's race or the region of the country they come from by their accent, the Galileans spoke with a distinctive accent. All of the Lord's twelve disciples were Galileans with the exception of Judas (he was from Judea). Thus in the Gospel of Matthew 26:73 when Peter is denying the Lord, one of the bystanders says to him, "Surely you are one of them, for your accent betrays you." While those on the outside heard the Galilean accents of the believers, each of them heard them praising God in the native languages of the places they come from throughout the world.

Those who were from Africa heard the various dialects of the Mother Continent. At the same time that the Africans were hearing God's praises in the various dialects and languages of Africa, those who were from Asia heard God's praises in the various dialects and languages of Asia. At the same time that the Africans and Asians were hearing God's praises in their native tongues, those from other regions in the Mid-East were hearing God's praise in various Semitic dialects and languages. At the same time that those from Africa, Asia, and Mid-East heard God's praise in their native tongues, those who were from Rome heard God's praises in Latin.

As those on the outside heard the unusual praise going forth in the upper room, a number of them who were amazed and perplexed asked each other, "What does this mean?" Others, however, mocked the praise of God's people and said, "They have had too much wine." When those of us who follow the Lord hear the mockery of the world, rather than being overly defensive, or becoming either discouraged or ashamed, or losing whatever cool or religion we have, we must understand we as humans tend to mock and laugh at, and even persecute newness, change, and difference. Even those of us who belong to the Lord, if we are not spiritually discerning and careful, can become so locked into our own traditions, well-worn modalities of thought, and secure and comforting routines of sameness, that we can also be guilty of mocking and persecuting anything that is new and different.

However both biblical and secular history is one long lesson and reminder that we have to be careful about mocking what we don't understand and laughing at what is new to us. After all, Noah was mocked in his day when he built his boat in the middle of the desert. Joseph, was mocked and persecuted because of his different

dreams. The early church was mocked and persecuted because their lifestyles were so different from the pagan society that surrounded it.

Lest we forget, when the black explorer Matthew Henson went with Admiral Perry in search of the North Pole, people laughed. They said that the fingers and toes of black people would fall off in weather that cold. But the first person to reach the North Pole was the black person they had derided, and he got there with all of his fingers and toes intact. Lest we forget, Jackie Robinson was mocked when he became the first black professional baseball player. He was mocked when he started playing first baseman for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Branch Rickey, the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, was mocked for hiring him. But in 1949 Jackie Robinson was voted the National League's most valuable player. People once laughed at the idea of black airplane pilots, but after the Tuskegee Air Men, people stopped laughing. People once laughed at the idea of a black woman demanding to be called "Miss" or "Mrs." However, after Miss Mary McLeod Bethune became advisor to the longest tenured U.S. president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and after Mrs. Shirley Chisholm went to Congress, and now that Mrs. Kamala Harris is the Vice-President of these United States, people have stopped laughing.

People once laughed at the idea of a Catholic being president of the United States, but when John F. Kennedy was elected, they stopped laughing. The day after Jimmy Carter announced for presidency, the headlines of the *Atlanta Constitution*, Georgia's leading newspaper, read, "Jimmy Carter is Running for What?" But soon and very soon, people stopped laughing at the country, southern, born-again Christian from Plains, Georgia. If anyone had ever brought up the idea of a black person being president when enslaved and freed African Americans, along with European immigrants, were building the White House, they would have been laughed to scorn. If in the year 2000 when George W. Bush was first elected president, if someone had said that a young black man named Barak Hussein Obama, would succeed him in office just eight years later, they would have been laughed to scorn. And when that black president said he would initiate health care reform, in spite of the failed efforts of so many presidents before him, he was also laughed to scorn.

Lest we forget, when the Lord was hung high and stretched wide on a cross on a hill called Calvary, he was mocked. As he hung between a sorrowing heaven and a sinning earth his enemies jested and said, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe." However rather than come down from the cross and fit in with a fickle and foolish crowd he chose to remain faithful to his purpose and faithful to his God. And early Sunday morning God raised him to stoop no more with all power in his hands, and God has given him a name that is above every other name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Some of us remember how we used to laugh at how people praised God. We used to laugh at how the saints of old stayed in church and how they used to talk. But now that we have done a little living ourselves, now that we have been burned by enough fire and have come up on the rough side of the mountain ourselves, and now that we have discovered the devil to be the liar that he is, we have come to our own appreciation of the wisdom of those we once laughed at. We are now in the church doing the same things, giving the same praise, knowing the same joy, serving the same Lord, and trying to live the same kind of saved life that we once laughed at others for doing.

While mockery can be personally painful and lonely, before we jump ship we should look at the source of the mockery. It is a compliment to be mocked by some groups and not fit in with some people. Better to be mocked for being educated and intelligent than to fit in and be accepted by ignorance. Better to be mocked for trying to be something and doing something worthwhile than to fit in with people who are going nowhere, doing nothing, and talking about nothing. Better to be mocked for having vision than to fit in easily with a bunch of vision-blind people. Better to be mocked for having values and standards than to fit in with a crass, classless, vulgar, profane, and low-life crowd. Better to be mocked for being saved, free, and delivered than to fit in with a bunch of infidels who are still in bondage and on their way to hell.

Better to be mocked because we are tithing and giving according to the word and Spirit of God, and live under an open heaven and enjoy the favor, overflow, and promises given to those who are obedient to the word of God in their giving, than to fit in with a whining, grumbling, and rebellious group of people who are under the curse of limitation because they are not obedient to the will, word, and instruction of God regarding tithing and giving. Some of us would rather have God's favor than the approval of certain people any day. Better to be mocked and told that we are cheap because we are trying to be financially free than to fit in with a bunch of broke people who are in debt and are always struggling to make ends meet. Better to be mocked for trying to own something than to fit in with a bunch of renters who will be leasing and renting for the rest of their lives, always subject to the whims of some landlord and never have anything they can call their own or be able to pass on to their children and grandchildren.

Better to be mocked for trying to be different and go farther, than to fit in with a frustrated crowd that lives in constant regret because they were too afraid to take a risk. We never know what we can do, how high we can fly, and how far we can reach unless we try. We never know what doors God will open unless we try. We never know what miracles God will perform on our behalf unless we try—yes, even at our age and stage, yes, even with our backgrounds and limitations, and yes, even with our past mistakes and failures, because God still has a vision for our lives that is greater than any vision we can have for ourselves or that others can have for us.

When Peter heard the cynical mockery of some of those who were in the crowd, with the eleven other apostles standing with him, he stood up and raised his voice and addressed those who misunderstood, misinterpreted, and mocked what they did not understand. He said, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.’”

Peter first informed his hearers that they were trying to comprehend the move of God with human understanding and that they were trying to explain divine occurrences with human explanations. That’s why they were puzzled and that’s why they laughed. One writer later picked up on such futile efforts and wrote:

Blind unbelief is sure to err, And scan His work in vain;
God is his own interpreter, And He will make it plain.

God’s work cannot always be grasped by the human mind or described by human vocabulary. Much of God’s work is a mystery and consequently it must simply be accepted as God’s work.

Healing cannot be explained—it must be accepted as God’s work. Miracles cannot be explained—they must be accepted as God’s work. Salvation and redemption cannot be explained—just accepted as God’s work. Love that lifts, grace that is sufficient, mercy that endures from one generation to another, forgiveness that removes all our sins as far as the east is from the west, cannot be explained—just accepted as God’s work. Ways that are made out of no ways cannot be explained—just accepted as God’s work. Christ, the eternal creative word of God who became Jesus, the human suffering servant cannot be explained—just accepted as God’s work. The movement, life-generating, and transforming power of the Holy Spirit cannot be explained—just accepted as God’s work.

Some things cannot be explained any more than one can explain how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly or how every river in the world flows from north to south with the exception of the Nile River, which flows from south to north. They must be accepted as God’s work. Some things cannot be explained any more than one can explain how a drop of sperm that fertilizes a woman’s egg contains all of the physical and personality traits of the child to be born or how out of all of the billions upon billions of snowflakes that fall during the winter, no two or exactly alike. They must be accepted as God’s work.

Some things cannot be explained any more than one can explain how some of us got up off of some sickbeds or how some of us got out of some of the situations we were born into or some of the messes we got ourselves into. They cannot be explained any more than one can explain how some accidents that should have hap-

pened to us didn't or how some of us ended up going to the schools we went to and graduated. They cannot be explained any more than one can explain why some of us are still standing. We just have to be accepted as God's work.

Peter told them of the futility of trying to give human explanations for God's work. Then he told them about the fulfillment of God's word because some of the things we do and some of the stands we take only make sense when we are governed by the word of God. He told them, "This is what was spoken through the prophet Joel." Our faith is centered and grounded in the truth of God's word—the word that is written down; the word that is living within our hearts; the word that has been validated by history and proven by our own personal experience; the word that has been revealed in Jesus Christ; the word that has been guaranteed by the Holy Spirit; the word that is believed by faith; and the word that is to be consummated in the fullness of time.

When the world is puzzled as to how we can make it through the maze of traps set for us, our faith rests in God's word, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own [understanding]. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."¹ When the world is puzzled as to how we can tithe and make financial sacrifices with all of our bills and then end up as stable as they are, if not better, even when we started off with less, our faith rests in God's word, "Bring the full tithe [and offerings] into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. I will rebuke the locust for you so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the Lord of hosts. Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts."²

Faith for our provision rests in the word of God, "Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine."³ Faith for our provision rests in the word of God, "And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."⁴ When the world is puzzled as to how we can keep our heads in a storm, our faith rests in the word of God, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."⁵ When the world laughs at our dreams, our faith rests in the word of God, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."⁶

When this world mocks our faith and tells us that we are forsaken and are all alone, our faith rests in the word of the Lord, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."⁷ When this world mocks our faith and tells us that we believe in myths and fairytales, our faith rests in the word of the Lord, "Heaven and earth shall pass away but my words will not pass away."⁸ When this world mocks our

lifestyles of sacrifice and service and tells you that “You only live once and when you’re dead you’re done, so you might as well let the good times roll,” our faith rests in the word of God, “And as it is appointed all [persons] once to die, and after this the judgment.”⁹ Our faith rests in the word of the Lord, “See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”¹⁰

Peter explained to a mocking world about the futility of trying to explain divine occurrences with human understanding. Peter told them about how some things can only be comprehended by an understanding of, faith in, and commitment to the word of God. Peter did all of this. Note that I said Peter, whose voice had once been raised with curses and denials of his relationship with Jesus, stood up boldly so the multitude so could plainly see who he was and how we was. Standing before them was no weaving or wobbling drunk, no timid, fumbling or fearful, mumbling, ready-to-run disciple, but a clear thinking, sure footed, steady, unfaltering, and unflinching man of God. Where did Peter get all of his courage? Whence did the change come? When the Holy Spirit fell, Peter was included in the room and in the number, and so when he opened his mouth and talked about the work of God and the word of God, he was talking from his own experience. He gave his own understanding of who Jesus was. There was nothing profound or deep about his message. Peter just related his own understanding of who Jesus was and what his death meant.

He said: “You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law ... This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are 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 both see and hear. 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.”’ Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

How do we avoid being a victim of a mocking world? We stand in front of the world and tell them, “Look at me. If you want to see what God can do with a life that is messed up, then look at me. If you want to see the difference that faith in the word of God can make in your life, then look at me. If you want to know if the word works, if God will forgive you, if Jesus can save you, and if the Holy Spirit can fill you and sanctify you, then look at me. If you really want to know if your future can be better than your past then look at me.”

How do we stand up to a mocking world—by remembering our own story. In times like these when there are so many efforts to disprove the claims of the Gospel, in times like these when we are constantly bombarded by negative news about the

faith and the church, if we ever begin to doubt the truth of what we believe, remember your own story. No matter what old manuscripts are discovered to refute the truth of the Gospel, no matter what novels are written to dispute the historic understanding of the faith, no matter what discouraging and disheartening news you hear about scandals in the church and imperfections among the saints, remember your own story. No matter how many of your leaders that you believe in and have trusted fall to their indiscretions, no matter how many times you may be disheartened, disappointed, and heartbroken because of the dirt you discover in the lives of the saints, remember your own story.

You were saved and redeemed by a real Savior whose life was without blemish. No myth or fairytale dug you up where the world had buried you and placed you upon a solid rock to stand. You have your own story to tell about the grace and the mercy of God, what Christ can and will do for you, and how the Holy Spirit will keep you, comfort you, and direct you when you don't know where to turn. The saints who brought you this message were not perfect, but God was able to use them to help you see the light. The church, whose worship inspired and nourished you when your soul was hungry and thirsty, whose ministries nurtured you, whose teachings directed and gave clarity to you, and helped you discover your gifts, was far from perfect. But God was still able to use it, warts and all, to bless your life, to give you hope, and to sustain you during dark moments of your life and the life of your family.

Your own story will keep you steady in the face of your mocking world. What kept the Samaritan woman with her held high in the same town where she was once the object of gossip? She remembered her story of how the Lord Jesus had given her living water. How was the demoniac Legion able to go back to the same region and win souls where he had once lived as an object of horror and shame? He remembered his story of how the Lord had set him free. How did the man born blind deal with the public disgrace of being put out of the synagogue when even his parents would not back him? He remembered his own story of how the Lord had given him sight.

How was the woman who was caught in sin able to go back to the same community and live with dignity among those who had tried to stone her? She remembered her story of how the Lord had shamed her hypocritical accusers and given her another chance at life. How was Paul able to preach the same Gospel he had once mocked and wrote as colleague among those whom he had once persecuted? He remembered his own story of how the Lord had turned him around on the Damascus Road. How was Peter able to talk boldly to a crowd about a Savior he had once denied? He remembered his own story of how the Lord forgave him and allowed him to receive his portion of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore no matter what happens, remember your story, because every child of God should have one about what the Lord can and will do in your life if we give him a chance. And while we are remembering our story, don't forget to do what Peter did. Don't forget to tell those who may question or mock your faith the good news that

Peter told his audience—that the same Jesus who saved him, who forgave him, who cleansed him, who gave him another chance is also available to them. Don't forget to tell them that your story can become their story too. And what is your story?

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.

Blessed assurance Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His spirit, washed in His blood.

Perfect submission, perfect delight,
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
Angels descending, bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.

Perfect submission, all is at rest;
I in my Savior am happy and blest,
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.

Notes

1. Proverbs 3:5-6
2. Malachi 3:10-12
3. Proverbs 3:9-10
4. Philippians 4:19
5. Philippians 4:6-7
6. Philippians 4:13
7. Matthew 28:20b
8. Matthew 24:35
9. Hebrews 9:27, KJV
10. Revelation 22:12-13