

Acts 2:24

This afternoon we're taking a look at another one of those **But God** moments in the Bible - this one is found in Acts 2:24. It seems to me that these are supernatural in every way and reminders of the sovereignty of God ... someone referred to them as 'blessed buts' ... and that's what they are: these are the hinges on which great doors open and close ... two words that change everything. In fact, when you see this phrase in your Bible, I'd suggest that you circle it, underline it, colour it, and start celebrating, because it's a gamechanger! You see, 'but God' marks those significant occasions when God stepped in ... when he came down from heaven and did what only he was able to do - a divine interruption; if you like, they are relentless and merciful interventions of God doing his own thing in human history.

It teaches us that God does not wait for us to bring ourselves to him, but that he takes the initiative to draw us to himself. Such intrusions are found in nearly every great salvation story in the Bible ... the first one is in Genesis 8:1, where we read: 'But God remembered Noah!'

But they also apply to each one of us on a personal level ... it speaks of one of those

'But God ...'

times when God steps into a situation in your life and mine and he turns it right side up - know what I mean, when he turns the worst of times into the best of times ... but God!

His track record is impeccable, exemplary, second to none. The plain truth is, where would we be without him?

And so today we're focusing on Acts 2:24, where we read: 'But God raised [Jesus] from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.'

That begs the question: Why could death not 'keep its hold on him?' I think there are three reasons: one, death could not hold him because of divine power. Jesus said in John 11:25 that he is 'the resurrection and the life' ... we know from Hebrews 2:14 that Jesus died so that 'through death he might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.'

Second, death could not hold him because of the divine promise - you read all about it in John 2:18-22 where the punchline is that he would rise on the third day. And he did!

Three, death could not hold him because of divine purpose - it was God's design that we should be with him forever - in order for us

to do that, we need to go through death and out the other side - Jesus had to go first to make the way an open way! He's 'the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.' And because he lives, we shall live eternally (John 14:19).

In order for us to fully appreciate this verse, verse 24, we need to see it in the context of the entire chapter ... only then does it make sense and only then does it plug the gaps in our thinking.

It doesn't matter how we look at it, there's no doubt that Pentecost was a divine visitation, a heavenly phenomenon – it was the moment when God kept his promise and came down, the hour when the Holy Spirit descended. [And our study today is a timely one, because tomorrow is Pentecost Sunday.]

So many wonderful things happened on that never-to-be-repeated-day ... the sound of a rushing wind, the tongues of flaming fire, the powerful transformation of lives when men were filled with the Spirit of God, the fascinating response of the onlookers when they heard these men speaking in their own language ... quite a day, to say the least.

And when we come to the second half of Acts 2, we discover that the end is not yet. Peter preached his heart out – I reckon, this was probably his finest hour. If he had only

one sermon to preach, this one deserves to be heard over and over again.

By the time we come to the end of the chapter and see the tremendous surge of interest in the things of God, we'll be wishing we had a few more Peter's in our pulpits today. I mean, the response isn't in the tens or hundreds, it's in the thousands – that's what happens when God works! And there's no other way to explain it. **But God!** It all started when Peter stood up before the crowd in verse 14 and told them a few home truths. He knew what some of them were thinking for he heard their snide remarks; he also saw the sneer on the faces of some of the more cynical observers and, in his favour, he was all too aware that some of them did put two and two together and make four.

That's why he felt as the spokesman for the Eleven as strongly and as passionately as he did – he was determined, under God, to set the record straight. He told them in no uncertain terms that some of them were barking up the wrong tree.

He nailed the lie that these Spirit filled men were drunk – apart from the fact that it was only nine in the morning, the whole idea of them being drunk was preposterous. It was senseless! So far as Peter was concerned, it was a slur on the upright character of the Eleven!

But that's the way the devil works – and two millennia down the line, his tack has not changed – if he can't wreck a ministry before it even gets off the ground, he'll launch a frontal assault on the man who heads it up!

The devil will do his level best to upend the Lord's servant; you see, Satan knows when God blesses a man that it's his territory that is under threat.

For a preacher, Peter shows us how to do it – if you analyse his sermon, there's one thing that hits you between the eyes: it is solidly biblical from start to finish. Here is the greatest sermon Peter ever preached. He quotes from many Old Testament sources ranging from the book of Joel to the Psalms and he applies them to the situation in hand. This guy has so much confidence in the word of God – and that's something we need to recover in our day!

He shows how, from the very first day, God has kept his word – you can see it in his patient dealings with the nation of Israel, you can see it in the coming of the long awaited Messiah, you can see it in the death and resurrection of Jesus our Saviour, you can see it in the exaltation and enthronement of Jesus Christ. His sermon is Christ centred!

And, by the time he comes to the end of it, the people are convicted to such a degree

that they ask, 'what shall we do?' That's when Peter challenged them to repent and get right with God! Wow, what a fantastic sermon! If you want to know how to preach a good sermon, you could do no better than follow Peter's excellent example – it worked for him, and with God's blessing resting on our efforts, it'll work for us as well.

Did you see where Peter began his discourse? He started away back in the rather obscure prophecy of Joel. I imagine not many of us have read the book of Joel, never mind preached from it – some of us mightn't even know what his message is. But the wee book is tucked away in the Minor Prophets; he's well worth reading.

What impresses me is this: Peter didn't use Joel as a proof text to back up what had happened at Pentecost – no, it was the other way round. Joel said in 2:28-32 that this was destined to happen – it was on God's agenda from the very beginning, and that makes it a classic case of fulfilled prophecy. It's as though Joel could say: 'I told you so!'

The principle is, it's best to interpret events from a biblical perspective – for us, even today, it pays handsome dividends when we see what God does through the non-tinted lens of Scripture.

There's another rich quality woven into the texture of Peter's incredibly influential

sermon. Not only is it biblical, and Christ centred, it is downright simple!

Why not take a moment later on and read it through for yourself – it is simplicity itself.

Peter uses words that everyone can understand. It's uncomplicated, it's non-technical, it's uncluttered: it's a straightforward presentation of biblical truth that even a child could grasp.

In fact, if you read Peter's sermon through, I reckon it took him no more than 5 or 6 minutes to preach it. Powerful stuff! It was a God anointed message!

As I said, it all started with Peter harking back to the not-so-well-known Old Testament prophet, Joel. Mind you, this man had his finger on the pulse of God's purpose – he prophesied that God would pour out his Spirit in a flood of grace and power.

He anticipated a day when a tidal wave of God's blessing would come and drench his people. He looked forward to a day when a people would be saturated with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

And this was it – Pentecost was the dream come true! That's what we read in verses 16-18.

The next couple of verses, however, throw fresh light on a day still to come – Peter uses Joel to remind us of a day when God will judge the world in righteousness and

truth. It's a day when many signs will appear in the heavens – signs that impact the sun, the moon, and the stars.

He strongly hints at the unthinkable horrors of the day of the Lord – in prophetic speak, that's the time of Tribulation with a capital T. The second advent of the Lord Jesus in power and glory will mark the end of the age of grace as we know it. It seems to me, from reading Joel and Peter, that there are dark days ahead for planet earth.

The bold Peter reminds us in verse 21 that 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' That's the gospel in a nutshell – a wonderful message of hope and deliverance.

You won't find salvation in anything else, you won't find salvation in anyone else, you won't find salvation anywhere else – it's exclusive in Jesus! A message we need to preach in today's postmodern world!

Peter's a preacher through and through – you can tell it by the way he rallies the crowd every now and again. He urges them to listen carefully to what he's about to say.

We read in verse 22: 'men of Israel, listen to this ...' What follows in verses 23-36 is a skilful exposition of who Jesus is! He paints a stunning mural of Jesus, highlighting half a dozen truths about him.

These six essential facts are easily summarised. Fact one is **his incarnation**.

We read in verse 22b that 'Jesus of Nazareth was a man.' Fact two is his authentication which is mentioned in verse 22c where we read he was 'accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.'

Fact three is his crucifixion at Calvary. We read in verse 23 that 'this Man ... you ... put ... to death by nailing him to the cross.' You crucified him, but God crowned him. You executed him, but God enthroned him. Fact four is his glorious resurrection which is referred to in verse 24 with the concise comment: 'God raised him from the dead.'

Fact five is his ascension which is spoken of in verse 33. We read that he was 'exalted to the right hand of God.' You cast him out, but God caught him up. And fact six is his enthronement in verse 36 where Peter declares that 'God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.'

Six plain facts about Jesus that tell us he is the eternal Son of the living God. In a breathtaking sermon, Peter has nailed his colours to the mast, he has pointed the people in the direction of Jesus. Now, the ball's in their court – I wonder what their response will be?

What a preacher! What a sermon! Great stuff! And, yes, there was an immediate response for we read in verse 37: 'When

the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and they said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

They were convicted of their sin because the word of God so powerfully pricked their hearts. That's what God's word does! That's what truth does. It's a razor sharp, double edged sword that stabs through people's puny defences, it exposes their true nature, it lays bare their lives before God.

They have been confronted with the reality of Jesus Christ and their first reaction is to ask, 'What do we need to do to get our lives sorted out before God!' Peter didn't have to be asked a second time – he told them, no punches pulled, in verse 38 to 'repent and be baptised!' He's still in preaching mode, so he gives them a three point answer!

When we talk about repentance, we're not talking about people feeling sad and sorry for their past. It's more radical than that – much more! It means to change your mind, it's an about turn.

Peter exhorted these potential converts to take on board a new mindset, they needed to adopt an entirely different view about Jesus. They had to see that Jesus really is the Son of God and that his death and resurrection is the key to them knowing new life and forgiveness of sins.

Repentance isn't only saying a resolute 'no' to sin and the devil, it's saying a one

hundred per cent 'yes' to Jesus as Lord and Saviour!

When Peter talks about baptism in the next breath, he sees it as a public testimony to their changed lives. It has nothing to do with their salvation because water won't wash their sins away. That's what Jesus does with his precious blood.

Baptism is them saying to all and sundry that Jesus has transformed them – the fact that they did it in public meant they weren't ashamed of their new found faith in Jesus.

Peter's words in verse 40 are highly charged – there's emotion in his voice – there's a sense that God is speaking through him when he pleads with them to 'save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'

An unusual way to put it, you might think. You see, the world in which they lived was twisted, crooked, and corrupt to the core, it was unbelievably perverse. And, two millennia later, that's a cameo of life today!

That's why Peter is so emphatic when he says what he does: he knew the destructive impact of that society's valueless lifestyle. It was his aspiration that these new Christians be saved, not just from the burning fires of hell, but from the ravaging forces of this world's volatile influence.

These folks were devout individuals – they were pious, they were there for the feast of Pentecost, they were doing what the law of

Moses encouraged them to do – they had a religion and, allied to that, they enjoyed all the trimmings and trappings that went along with it – they were up to their eyes in doing things which they felt would please God, and earn his favour. But, there was something seriously lacking in their lives, and well they knew it!

The fact is, Christianity is nothing less and can be nothing more than a relationship to Jesus Christ. Knowing Jesus personally is not a religion – it's a way of life, it's a lifestyle, it speaks of intimacy with the Almighty. And that's what Peter advocates in these verses.

Needless to say, not everyone believed what Peter said – there were those who poured cold water on it, some wanted nothing to do with it; but, there were many who said 'yes' to Jesus – Luke tells us in verse 41 that 3,000 people were baptised and 'added to their number that day.'

Look at it like this: that morning there was only a big handful of believers in Jesus, by the time the sun had gone down in the west that same day, there was a lot, lot more!

The church was born! Only God can do that – there's the genius of grace!

A final thought ... I'm not sure what you think about when you think about church – it seems to me in 2024 that we've moved a long way from what church was like in the early days!

The last few verses in Acts 2 give us a beautiful insight into what a New Testament church is meant to be – a church isn't a building, a church is people, people who know Jesus! In fact, you can have a church without having a building! And in my travels I've had that experience.

There were four priorities in the early church and Peter spells them out for us in verse 42: 'they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.'

The thought behind the word 'devoted' is steadfastness, total commitment to a cause you believe in, a single minded dedication – in a word, they were focused!

But, focused on what? First, teaching was right at the very top of their agenda. They realised the value and importance of a good biblical ministry; they knew teaching would give them a solid foundation and it would also contribute to their growth in the short term as well as the longer term.

Fellowship is the Greek word 'koinonia' and it means sharing in common. It is people who are in it together, doing things together, and sharing things together – it's vibrant, authentic Christianity in action.

The 'breaking of bread' which Peter refers to was an occasion when they celebrated the Lord's supper – it kept Calvary fresh in their hearts and minds.

Their experience of doing church is rounded off with 'prayer' – there was a sense of affinity at the throne of grace as they poured out their hearts before the Lord for him to move in blessing.

4 wonderful hallmarks of a good church – but each of these have enormous spin-offs as is seen in verses 43-47. Teaching led to the people responding with a sense of awe at what God was doing in their midst – there was a holy hush, an astute awareness that God was actively at work.

There was a real depth to their fellowship – they didn't just talk about it – they did it – and that's obvious when we see their big hearts for other people in any kind of need. We read all about it in verses 44 and 45.

When they shared communion together, those were times of celebration, moments of joy and gladness. There is a spirit of unity among them for that's the thought behind them having 'sincere hearts' – there were no emotional rough edges. People got along with each other because of their love for Jesus and their appreciation of his love for them.

Last, but not least, their prayers worked wonders when we see the results – they experienced phenomenal church growth – the historian Luke reminds us that 'the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.' Every day people were

being converted! Isn't that fantastic – but,
that's what happens when we do church
God's way!

Great chapter, isn't it! It's all about a great
God! A God who steps in when we step up
to the plate; a God who steps in when we
step aside. Think about it ... **'But GOD ...!'**