

Sermon 9-9-18  
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W. Hempstead, NY  
Based on Mark 7:37, James 2:18 and Acts 2:36-39, 42-47

## **You Are What You Believe**

How would a Jew or any gentile who reads the Old Testament know who the Messiah is when He appears? The answer is that Yahweh's definitions of His Messiah are scattered throughout His Word – the Old Testament. It's a matter of identifying them and stringing them together into a comprehensive whole.

In today's gospel lesson we see that people realized that Jesus had fulfilled one important definition of Messiah. We read of their analysis and conclusion in Mark 7:37, "People were overwhelmed with amazement. 'He has done everything well,' they said. 'He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.'"

On what basis did they reach their conclusion? There is a Messianic prophecy found in our first lesson for today. Isaiah 35:4-6, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come . . . he will come to save you.' 5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. 6 Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy." By healing the deaf and the mute they recognized that Jesus had fulfilled that prophecy before their eyes. They were seeing the work of the victorious Messiah as Jesus turned the despairs of this life into new hope.

So let's ask an important question. Why was it, then, that at Jesus' trial before Pontius Pilate they could no longer see Jesus as the Messiah, but asked that a murderer be released to them instead?

True – the Passover crowd in Jerusalem was a different crowd from the crowd mentioned in today's gospel – a crowd from the gentile area of the Decapolis, northeast of Israel. But that doesn't really explain it. The crowd in Jerusalem was well aware of Jesus' status as a miracle worker. They even mockingly urged Him to exercise His miracle working power to come down from the cross.

Therefore, why couldn't they see Him as Messiah? Because Jesus stood before that crowd whipped, beaten, bloody, with a humiliating crown of thorns. In the clutches of Rome's vicious justice He was hardly the victorious Messiah. He was just an ordinary subject of the empire headed for execution. And most importantly, the crowd had zero knowledge of a suffering Messiah, even though the suffering Messiah was hidden in plain sight in their Scripture – the Old Testament – just as He remains hidden today for those without the Holy Spirit.

What did it take for Jerusalem to see a suffering Messiah in the prophets? What does it take to acknowledge and receive God's gift – the suffering, crucified Messiah – as one's own? The New Testament gives the answer. It took an action of God – the pouring out of His Holy Spirit as prophesied in the prophet Joel.

God took action first with the apostles and the other people in the upper room. On Easter evening Jesus breathed on them and said, "receive the Holy Spirit." From that point forward that bunch of non-scholars were able to receive the suffering and

victorious Messiah. They were able to identify and string together from the Old Testament all the definitions that identify the true Messiah. Therefore, when the Day of Pentecost came, the apostles were able to proclaim Jesus of Nazareth as the suffering and victorious Messiah promised by Moses and the prophets centuries before.

But the apostles' proclamation would have been in vain if God had not taken another action. He poured out His Holy Spirit upon all flesh on the Day of Pentecost. It would now be possible for anyone to see and receive the suffering and victorious Messiah proclaimed in the pages of the Old Testament. This was and remains true today for both Jew and Gentile. In the present time the only thing that stops a Jew from receiving Jesus as Messiah is the false indoctrination of the rabbis that the suffering servant verses of the Old Testament can't possibly refer to Jesus. In the present time the only thing that stops a gentile from receiving Jesus as Messiah is the false indoctrination by an educational system that not only disparages Jesus, but even denies that there is a Holy Creator of all that exists. The only thing stopping gentile members of other religions from receiving Jesus as Messiah is false indoctrination by their systems.

But again even all the false propaganda and indoctrination in the world cannot stop God from acting upon those He has chosen. No one can prevent His Spirit from acting on a human heart. For this reason, we have testimonies from people of every religion, every nation, every walk of life who have received Jesus as Messiah.

Thus, the only way to confess and know Jesus as the suffering and victorious Messiah, is by the action of God. And, if you yourself know Jesus, the suffering and victorious Messiah, as your savior, it is only by God's loving gracious action upon you. It is the work of Lord Holy Spirit.

On the Day of Pentecost 33A.D. Peter finished his sermon by saying to the assembled crowd in Acts 2:36, "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." He didn't pull any punches. He rightly condemned all Israel for the crucifixion of the Messiah, the Son of God. Now, instead of rising up in anger, hatred and self-justification against Peter, we read in Acts 2:37, "When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'" That was an act of the Holy Spirit, because elsewhere in Acts we read how other people in Jerusalem rose up in self-justification against the charge that they crucified Jesus.

So, when Lord Holy Spirit comes upon a person, one of the first things that happens is what happened to that crowd in Jerusalem. The Spirit of God opens your eyes to your whole life from childhood to the present, and you see where you have sinned and rebelled against Yahweh's holy purpose for your life. You see where you have sat down on God's big throne and arrogantly decided good and evil for yourself. You see the injury you have done to others and the self-justification for it falls away. And if you perceive yourself as a victim of some form of injustice, all the self-righteousness falls away. God opens you like a can. Your whole life is visible to both Him and you. Nothing remains hidden. Scary. Isn't it?

But all this brings you to the same place of openness as that crowd on Pentecost. Brothers, tell us. What shall I do? So, Peter replied to the crowd and us in Acts 2:38-39, "38... 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for

the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off-for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

So notice the order here. Repentance and baptism into Jesus Christ comes first. Baptism into Jesus results in two things: forgiveness of your sins and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. But understand that baptism does not mechanically do this. Faith in God’s Word regarding baptism is necessary. We must believe that God Himself takes action upon us through baptism.

This is proven by what happened immediately after the Day of Pentecost. We read in Acts 2:42-47, “42 They [those who had been baptized into Christ] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” These are all the results of faith in Jesus, the Word of God. Without faith in the Word the apostles proclaimed none of this would have happened.

In today’s second lesson, the apostle James tells us in James 2:18, “... I will show you my faith by what I do.” And this is perfectly understandable. For all our life actions reflect what we actually believe. For those who believe money is the most important thing in life, all their actions will prove it. For those who believe that Jesus is the center of life – indeed, the Son of the Creator of the universe – all their actions will prove it. Everyone shows what they believe by what they do.

So, in the days following Pentecost 33A.D. the actions and life focus of the people who had repented, believed and received Lord Holy Spirit were different from those of the other people around them – even attractively different. And apparently others were interested in what was going on. For it says that the Lord was adding to their numbers daily.

Therefore, let’s examine the process a little closer and see what it means for us. First of all, Lord Holy Spirit opens the gates and strings together the picture of who Jesus is and what He means for us. This can come from the Old Testament, the New Testament or both. It can come from the preached Word or things written about Jesus. But when the picture of Jesus is assembled for us it must check out against Scripture.

Then when the Spirit has assembled a Jesus picture for us He turns on the lights. We finally see Jesus, our Lord and the world is different. He’s not just an historical figure. He’s real. He’s alive. He’s close at hand.

And so Holy Spirit brings us up the three tiers of faith. We believe Jesus’ reality. We confess back to Him, “Jesus you are real.” And then the Spirit makes it personal. Jesus, you are my Lord and my God. When such faith is in place we get to what James spoke of, namely “I will show you my faith by what I do.”

Understand that this process is not necessarily a delight. People often go through rough times to get to the place where the lights go on. In the late eighties the

congregation hired a non-religious Jewish woman to be our organist and musician. She sat under my preaching for a number of years but remained unmoved. Then, her husband unexpectedly passed away. As a result she was at such a loss that she wanted to settle this God thing once and for all. Therefore, one night she laid out all her philosophy books and other material and started searching. I forget exactly what happened and how, but she came to the conclusion that Jesus is Messiah. Susan lives in Indiana now and we keep in contact. So I can ask her if you want to know.

In addition, after the lights have gone on, sooner or later faith will be sifted and tested. For instance, there came a day when the Jerusalem church was persecuted. Some lost loved ones. Most had to flee. Some wound up in prison. What of faith in Jesus in such circumstances? But the same Spirit who brings three-tiered faith in Jesus also preserves faith in Jesus even in the midst of great trials.

If you remember, at Pentecost we talked about being filled with the Spirit. We need periodic refilling because of the attacks of this life. In such circumstances our courage and our orientation fail. God seems far away and the Spirit nowhere to be found. But repenting of doubt and unbelief and forgiveness of sins restores the necessary confidence in Jesus Christ.

One last thing – and this concerns infant baptism. You saw what Scripture teaches – repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. When by faith we bring a baby to be baptized into Jesus Christ, that child receives just what Scripture promises.

But as the child grows, just like the rest of us he or she will be immersed in the war of words that surrounds those born in original sin. What then? Who to listen to? And will parents, sponsors and the church fulfill their responsibility to feed the child the Word of God? Will the child live in a Christian home? Will he or she rebel against the parents' Christianity? Or will the child follow? These are among the issues that all people baptized as infants face.

Therefore, at some point in life a person baptized as an infant must take on faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for themselves – or not. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ must be confirmed in their heart – or not. Confirmation can happen at any age. Years ago a woman attended here who testified that she had known and trusted Jesus since she was age two – for as long as she could remember. I've had other people in their 50's say, I've been going to church all my life, why didn't I see this before?

Well, our enemy, the devil, is always prowling around looking for some way to make the Word of the Lord sound like meaningless mumbo jumbo. And he succeeds – mostly with people outside the church – but even with people inside the church. Jesus Christ is never irrelevant. The church is never irrelevant. However, caught in the web of the enemy's propaganda it can seem so.

For from the beginning with Adam and Eve, in a most incredible way, our Creator has let words of rebellion sound far more realistic, far more credible, far more powerful than His Word. And the reason for this is simple. With Yahweh, life must be lived by faith in Him and His Word, even when there is nothing but darkness, confusion and persecution all around.

So how do we get such faith in Jesus? The answer is a bit mystifying, but it's true. The entire battle belongs to Yahweh. He supplies His Word. He supplies the moment

of conversion to the truth of Jesus – when the lights go on. He supplies the faith in Jesus that sees us through the darkness. All the action must be His. He reserves all the glory for Himself. It all comes through His Spirit.

As sinners we can contribute nothing. We can only cry out in repentance and let Lord Holy Spirit confirm our baptism into Jesus Christ. But if we will do so, something remarkable happens. Lord Holy Spirit takes action and we come to believe the truth that Yahweh gives us. And then as James said, faith in Yahweh's Word results in life action. We can show our faith by what He enables us to do. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.