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MESSAGES IN ACTS GIVEN BY PETER, STEPHEN, AND PAUL

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Does your preaching sometimes seem like it's bouncing off one of those bullet-proof shields they place in front of the President's podium?

Too often, we design our sermons around some topic or some particular passage and we get so bogged-down in the details that they come out sounding pompous and boring. So we search for some interesting or amusing illustrations to give them more appeal. But then the result is merely pompous and fluffy; a contradiction in terms that shows through the moment we start to speak.

In desperation, we turn to the masters for help: Spurgeon, Moody, Barnhouse, and others more ancient, as well as perhaps some more recent. We search their works for the formula that will deliver us from our doldrums. Like a ship under sail in a becalmed sea, we search for the tiniest refreshing breeze that may ease us on our way.

But our search often misses some of the finest, most provocative, and most soul stirring sermons of all time: the three major sermons recorded by our Father through the hand of Luke in the book of Acts. Peter, Stephen, and Paul spoke in the midst of opposition which makes the "opposition" of our sleepy congregations pale into insignificance by comparison.

I urge you to re-examine these sermons. They might

refresh your own with the fiery reality of the gospel that will wake up your hearers and demand a decision from them!

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Peter's message is recorded in Acts 2:14-40. Peter spoke in Jerusalem, at the gathering place of the apostles. (Perhaps this was the "upper room.")

Peter spoke to a crowd of God-fearing Jews from every nation: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judeans, Capadocians, Pontians, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphilians, Egyptians, Libyans, Romans, Cretans, and Arabs.

Peter began in response to the jeering accusation of some in the crowd that those they heard speaking in tongues were drunk with wine. He quoted Joel 2:28-32 and affirmed that the speaking in tongues was the fulfillment of that Old Testament prophecy.

Peter reminded the crowd that they had seen the miracles which attested to Jesus' accreditation and that it was God who handed Jesus over to them. They had crucified Jesus but God had raised him from the dead, because it was impossible for death to hold him.

Peter quoted David in Psalm 16:8-11 and argued that David did see death and corruption. He said that it was Jesus who is exalted to the right hand of God, not David. Peter quotes David again, this time from Psalm 110:1, and affirmed that David did not ascend, but that he was rather

referring to Jesus in that verse.

Peter then declared that God had made this Jesus, whom they crucified, both Lord and Christ.

Peter's audience was cut to the heart. They cried out, "What shall we do?" Peter told them to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. 3,000 were saved that day and added to the church.

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Stephen's message is recorded in Acts 7:2-56. Stephen was speaking in the Temple at Jerusalem.

Stephen was speaking to two separate groups at the same time. The first group consisted of several members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen: Jews of Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia. These men were accusing him of speaking against the temple and the law. The second group was the Sanhedrin which was sitting in judgment over him. Stephen began his message in answer to the Sanhedrin's request that he respond to the accusations made against him.

Stephen began his message by rehearsing Hebrew history from Abraham through Christ. He quoted Amos 5:25-27 regarding idolatry and Isaiah 66:1-2 regarding Solomon's temple.

Stephen accused his audience of being like their fathers who killed the prophets. He accused them of killing Jesus. He accused them of receiving the law but not obeying it.

Stephen declared that he saw Heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

Stephen's audience was incensed: they took him out and stoned him to death. Saul (later Paul the Apostle) guarded their clothes while they were stoning him. Stephen asked God not to hold the sin against them. Saul approved of his death.

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Paul's message is recorded in Acts 13:16-41. Paul spoke in the Synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (in what is now southwestern Turkey.)

Paul was speaking to those in the Synagogue: Jews and also Gentiles who worship God. Paul and Barnabas had gone into the Synagogue on the Sabbath and sat down. After reading from the law and the prophets, the rulers of the Synagogue asked Paul and Barnabas if they had anything to say.

Paul began by rehearsing Hebrew history from the Egyptian captivity through the ministry of John the Baptist. Paul said that the people of Jerusalem and their rulers had not recognized Jesus, but in pressing for his crucifixion they had fulfilled prophecy (but God raised him from the dead.)

Paul quoted Psalm 2:7 to verify that Jesus is God's Son. He quoted Isaiah 55:3 to verify that Jesus is David's heir.

He quoted Psalm 16:10 to verify that Jesus is the Holy One. Paul argued that David could not have been applying those words to himself: David did die and see corruption. But Jesus did not: God raised him from the dead.

Paul declared that forgiveness of sins is proclaimed through Jesus and that Jesus justifies apart from the law.

Paul and Barnabas were then invited to come back and speak again on the following Sabbath. At that time, some believed (particularly among the Gentiles) but others persecuted Paul and Barnabas and drove them out of the city.

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The people who heard these sermons didn't go to sleep in the pew! They were struck to the very core of their beings by these words. They had to make a decision. Some decided to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and they were saved. Others decided to reject Jesus Christ, either vehemently and violently or merely through lack of concern.

If we inject the concepts of these sermons into our own, we may see an awakening in our own congregations too!

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