

The Festival of Pentecost: Then and Now

What Actually Happened
What it Meant for the people then
What it means for us today

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues^[a] as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,^[b] ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ “In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

¹⁹ I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

²⁰ The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

²¹ And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.^[c]

Tell me, if you were to ask the average Joe out on the street, “Say, can you name the three major festivals of the Christian church year?”, do you think he could do it? He’d probably get two of the three right, don’t you think? He’d say, “Well, you’ve got Christmas and Easter, but that third one, I don’t know, is it Thanksgiving? Or Mother’s day? Maybe St Patty’s Day?”

Chances are he wouldn't come up with the Festival of Pentecost. Why is that? Why has the world around us kind of missed the significance of Pentecost? Could it be that Pentecost is the only one of the three big Christian festivals which have not been commercialized? I mean, I don't know about you, but I didn't see any pre-Pentecost sales this week. There wasn't a Pentecost parade this weekend. Nobody is selling chocolate tongues of fire. And really, that's okay, because it allows us to focus on what Pentecost is really all about. And that's what we want to do today. We want to turn our attention to Luke's inspired account of the events on that first Pentecost Sunday and the implication that those events have for our lives today. Our theme is simply this:

The Festival of Pentecost: Then and Now

We'll consider three things about Pentecost:

- I. What actually happened
- II. What it meant for the people then
- III. What it means for us today

Luke begins his account with the words, *When the day of Pentecost came....* That word Pentecost actually means 50. It refers to the fact that this Jewish festival occurred exactly 50 days after the Jewish Passover. Jews were expected to gather in Jerusalem to offer to God their first fruits from the spring grain harvest. This, by the way, is why there were so many Jewish people from all over the world in the city of Jerusalem at that time.

Of course, for us Christians, the day has taken on a different meaning. But the name is still appropriate. Only in our case, rather than counting 50 days from the Passover, we count 50 days from Easter Sunday, and 10 days after Jesus' ascension into heaven.

So, what happened on that first Pentecost day? Luke records the events with the words, *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the*

blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Wow, talk about special effects! Three miracles, rolled into one.

The ball of fire that came down and broke into individual flames on the heads of the disciples without singeing their hair, was a miraculous fire, similar to the fire of the burning bush in which God revealed himself to Moses in the Old Testament. This fire on Pentecost was also the fulfillment of a prophecy made by John the Baptist a few years earlier when he said, *I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.* (Matthew 3:11) This fire of the Holy Spirit was a fulfillment of those words.

The second miracle is what Luke describes as *the sound like the blowing of a violent wind*. Notice, this wasn't an actual wind. It wasn't that a tornado hit the house where the disciples were gathered. It only sounded like a tornado hit struck the house. And what's the connection between the sound of wind and the Holy Spirit? Well, maybe you know that in the Greek language, the word for Spirit is also translated as wind or breath. In fact, in the Hebrew language the word for Spirit sounds like a wind. The Hebrew word for Spirit is “rhuuuuuach”, which you can hardly say without thinking of the wind. (Technically, that’s called an onomatopoeia, a word that sounds like what it is.) The point is that there is a connection between the spirit and the wind or a breath. In fact, remember what Jesus did for his disciples on Easter Sunday evening? *He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”* (John 20:22) Well, Jesus was pouring out his Spirit with the sound of an even bigger wind, a wind which ultimately caused a crowd to gather, many of whom were foreigners from countries throughout the Mediterranean world—

which is why the Holy Spirit came with one more miraculous sign. He gave to the disciples the gift of speaking in tongues, that is, the ability to spontaneously speak foreign languages which they had never learned before. They were not simply babbling. They were not speaking a prayer tongue that had to be interpreted. No, they were speaking languages which foreigners could understand without the aid of an interpreter. And what were the disciples using their newfound language to talk about? The foreigners tell us, *“We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”* In other words, the apostles were preaching the Gospel, the wonders of Jesus’ life and death and resurrection! You put this together, the fire, the wind the speaking in tongues and is it any wonder that Luke tells us, *“Amazed and perplexed, the people asked one another, what does this mean?”*

Well, that's a good question. II. What did all these things mean for the people on that day? Fortunately for them and for us, God waste no time explaining to the people what these events meant. In fact, he has the Apostle Peter do the explaining. Luke tells us, *Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen to what I have to say.” (Acts 2:14-15)*

Now, before we hear Peter's explanation, let's take a moment to appreciate that this is the same Peter who less than 2 months earlier, had claimed he didn't even know who Jesus was, who later, along with the rest of the Apostles, hid behind locked doors for fear of the Jews, the same Peter whom Jesus had once rebuked with the words, “O you of little faith.” Now this Peter is going to stand up and boldly preach a sermon to potentially the same people who had called for Jesus’ crucifixion? How do you explain that change in a person? The answer is...the power of the Holy Spirit. Remember what Jesus told the disciples before he ascended into heaven? *“I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed*

with power from on high. (Luke 24:49) And again, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you;" (Acts 1:8) Friends, those words were fulfilled in the events of Pentecost day, when Peter and the other disciples were given the power to proclaim the truth, boldly and accurately.

And yet, Pentecost marked the fulfillment of more than just that prophecy. It also marked the fulfillment of a much broader prophecy handed down by God through the prophet Joel. Here in our text, Peter refers to that prophecy. Peter explains to the crowd, *"This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.'"* (Acts 2:16-17) Do you realize what a momentous statement that is? That statement marks a turning point in the history of God's plan of salvation.

Think about it. In the centuries before Pentecost, was the Holy Spirit active? Absolutely. There couldn't have been any believers if the Holy Spirit wasn't at work. Throughout the Old Testament times, the Spirit was still working on people's hearts, convicting them of sin, calling them to faith in the coming Messiah. But you'd also have to say that the work of the Holy Spirit was restricted mainly to one nation, the nation of Israel. Even though there were some exceptions to this rule, still God worked primarily with his chosen descendants of Abraham, the Jews.

And yet, on Pentecost, all that changed. By giving his disciples the ability to share the gospel in many languages, God was making it clear that he intended that his church include people from every nation, language and race. God intended his church to be not merely a national church, but an international church. And how would that happen? Well, God tells us through the Prophet Joel, *"Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will prophesy."* (Acts 2:17,18) What does he mean by that? Well, again, think about the difference between the Old and New

Testaments. In the Old Testament, God spoke to his people through specific prophets like Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah. How did the writer to the Hebrews put it? *In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. (Hebrews 1:1,2)*

Isn't that right? You think of all the words and actions of Jesus recorded for us in the pages of the New Testament. And then Jesus tells us that when we share his words with others, it's as if God himself is talking through us. What did Jesus tell his followers in Luke 10:16? *"Whoever listens to you, listens to me."* In other words, in the New Testament era, God is going to equip his people with the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, so that whether we are young or old, whether we are men or women, they can serve as God's prophets. We can prophesy, that is, we can share the good news of God's love in Christ for all people.

This weekend we'll be giving thanks to God for five very special prophets. Five men and women whom the Holy Spirit has called and equipped to serve in the public ministry. Teachers who served us and our children with the word of God for many years, and for that we are so very grateful.

And yet, you realize that it's not just public ministers of the gospel who serve as prophets these days. It's not just public ministers of the Gospel who have been given the gifts of the Spirit. So have you. If you know and believe that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior, then you can know that the Holy Spirit has been given to you too.

But along with that gift of the Spirit, comes all kinds of other spiritual gifts. No, maybe not the ability to spontaneously speak a foreign language. If you want to do some mission work overseas, you may need to learn the language the old-fashioned way. But make no mistake, the same Holy Spirit who was so generously poured out on Pentecost, is still being poured out today.

He may not come with rushing wind or tongues of fire, but he still comes. He comes through the washing of holy baptism. He comes through the sacrament of the Lord's supper. He comes through the word of God which you are hearing right now. And through these means of grace, God the Holy Spirit is giving you the power to be the person that God has called you and recreated you to be in Christ. The power to say no to the desires of your sinful nature. The power to stand up and speak the truth in love as Peter did on Pentecost. The power to be used by God as an instrument in his hands to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. My friends, this is what Pentecost is all about. It's a celebration of the Spirit's presence and the Spirit's power in our hearts and lives today, by grace, through the gift of faith in Jesus, our Savior. Amen.