

The Significance of Pentecost

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Turning the World Upside Down / Pentecost; The Holy Spirit Comes at Pentecost; Filling of the Holy Spirit; Wind; Fire; Tongues / Acts 2:1-13

Acts 2:1-13 shows us the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Introduction

Luke wrote the book of Acts to tell Theophilus about how Jesus turned the world upside down.

Jesus commissioned his apostles to take the good news of his resurrection to the entire world, beginning “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” ([Acts 1:8](#)).

Before the apostles could begin their mission, however, they had to wait in Jerusalem for the gift of the Holy Spirit (see [Acts 1:4-5](#)).

Jesus knew that the coming of the Holy Spirit would empower his followers to fulfill the mission that he had given them.

So, ten days after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, on the day of Pentecost, the Father sent the Holy Spirit to the apostles and the other disciples who were waiting in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

[Acts 2:1-13](#) tells us about the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Several unusual phenomena took place with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

There are some people for whom the phenomenon of “tongues” jumps out. Great attention is paid to the tongues that took place with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

However, I think that James Montgomery Boice is right when he says, “That is not the emphasis of the passage itself” (James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expositional Commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997], 39).

I am following Boice in this exposition because I think he has rightly captured the emphasis of the passage.

Yes, the apostles and disciples spoke in tongues.

But the Holy Spirit came to them as wind and fire. Tongues must be understood in terms of the phenomena of wind and fire.

Scripture

Let's read [Acts 2:1-13](#):

¹ When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

⁵ Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. ⁷ And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, ¹¹ both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." ¹² And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."

Lesson

Acts 2:1-13 shows us the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Phenomenon of Wind
2. The Phenomenon of Fire

I. The Phenomenon of Wind

First, the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit is seen in the phenomenon of wind.

In the major ancient languages—Hebrew and Greek (in which the Old and New Testaments were written) and even Latin (which was widely spoken at this time)—the word for “spirit” was also used for “wind” or “breath.”

So when Luke tells us that they heard “**a sound like a mighty rushing wind**” (v. 2), the word “**wind**” also means “spirit.”

As a result, no one who normally thought in Hebrew, Greek, or even Latin would have missed what Luke meant.

But what did Luke mean?

Let me direct your attention to two Old Testament texts and one New Testament text so that we can understand Luke’s meaning.

In the Old Testament, [Genesis 1:1–2](#) states, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”

When we think of God creating the heavens and the earth, we think of the Holy Spirit as a dove hovering over the waters that were covering the earth at that time.

But that is not the idea at all.

Rather, the Holy Spirit of God is portrayed as God’s breath—the creative, moving, dynamic breath of God. This breath—this divine, life-giving wind—is what is blowing across the waters at the beginning.

One chapter later, in [Genesis 2:7](#), God created Adam from the dust of the ground. There we read: “Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.”

This indicates that apart from the breath of God, man was just dead matter. He was dead as dust.

For man to have life, God, who is the source of life, had to breathe some of his life into Adam. Only then did Adam become a living being.

Now, in the New Testament, in [John 3](#), Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus about the new birth.

Jesus told Nicodemus that to have eternal life and be saved a person needed to be “born again” ([John 3:3, 7](#)).

Jesus used a word for “again” that means (1) “again, just like the first time,” and (2) “from above.” That is, a person needed to be born again from above just like the first time.

What was Jesus getting at?

Nicodemus did not know. He asked, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” ([John 3:4](#)).

Jesus explained, saying, in [John 3:5–8](#), “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus still did not understand Jesus because he responded by asking, “How can these things be?” ([John 3:9](#)).

But we can understand since we have the completed canon and we can put together the teaching on this subject.

Think of what is said of the creation of Adam at the beginning of Genesis. God breathed into Adam so that he became a living being.

Now we find Jesus saying that the new spiritual life that all people need must be breathed into them in a way analogous to God’s creation of Adam.

Just as God breathed into Adam so that he became a living physical being, so also if a person is to be saved God must breathe into him or her by his Holy Spirit

once again from above, just like the first time so that the person might become spiritually alive.

We may be physically alive without the new birth, but if we are to become spiritually alive, God must breathe his Spirit into us.

Nicodemus should have recognized what Jesus was talking about.

When we put the Old Testament and New Testament texts together we begin to get a sense of why the image of wind is so important.

Luke tells us in [Acts 2:2](#) that **“suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.”**

That sounds very much like the story of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters of the earth at creation.

So the suggestion is that here, in Acts, we have a new creation—more important in many ways than the original creation of the heavens and the earth.

The present heavens and the earth are destined to pass away, but that which is done by the Spirit who came at Pentecost will last forever.

Again, the account in Acts is reminiscent of [Genesis 2](#), where God breathes life into man. Pentecost is a life-breathing experience.

The account is also like [John 3](#), where Jesus told Nicodemus, “You must be born again” ([John 3:7](#)).

The coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost as a mighty rushing wind was meant to picture the coming of the creative power of God to inaugurate a new era in which men and women are brought to new, spiritual life.

Now, let us look at another term that is used in the account of the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the word **“filled.”**

Luke said that the disciples **“were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance”** ([Acts 2:4](#)).

In the New Testament, there is a distinction between being *baptized* with the Holy Spirit and being *filled* with the Holy Spirit.

People talk about the baptism of the Holy Spirit as if that is what Pentecost was about. Usually, they mean that Pentecost “baptism” is a special experience that involves the gift of being able to speak in tongues.

Some would say that the ability to speak in tongues is the only sure evidence that a person has been baptized with the Spirit.

Now, the Bible does talk about the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but not in those terms.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit has to do with regeneration or being born again. It results in the regenerated person being identified with Jesus Christ spiritually.

Paul tells the Corinthian believers that “in one Spirit we were *all* baptized into one body” ([1 Corinthians 12:13](#)). All Christians, at the moment of regeneration, are baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Jesus Christ.

However, to be filled with the Holy Spirit is different, and it is this which is being talked about here in [Acts 2:4](#).

There are unique features about the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, such as the phenomena of wind and fire.

But some features have become normative for Christians throughout all ages, such as the filling with the Holy Spirit.

The first-century disciples did not become Christians at Pentecost.

They were already Christians. They believed in Jesus. They were meeting together. They were obedient. They were praying. They were studying the word of God.

But now the Holy Spirit came upon them to empower them for their task.

The word to describe that experience is “**filled.**”

The expression “**filled with the Holy Spirit,**” or some similar expression, is used 14 times in the New Testament.

It is used four times before Pentecost ([Luke 1:15](#), [41](#), [67](#); [4:1](#)) and is more in line with the Old Testament than with New Testament experiences.

There is one important reference in [Ephesians 5:18](#).

The other nine references are in Acts ([Acts 2:4](#); [4:8](#), [31](#); [6:3](#); [7:55](#); [9:17](#); [11:24](#); [13:9](#), [52](#)).

The notable thing is that the circumstances common to *every* case is that whenever Christians were **“filled with the Holy Spirit”** they immediately began *to witness boldly to Jesus*.

It is not that they spoke in tongues, though this did occur on the day of Pentecost.

It is not that they did miracles, though occasionally miracles were performed.

In every instance, when they were **“filled with the Holy Spirit,”** they immediately began *to witness boldly to Jesus*.

Someone might say, “Yes, but at Pentecost they did it in tongues.” That is true.

But that is not the emphasis, nor is it part of the other examples of being **“filled with the Holy Spirit.”**

In [Acts 2](#), the emphasis is upon the fact that everyone heard the gospel about Jesus because the tongues were in languages understandable to the hearers.

So, if you ask whether a person is “Spirit-filled,” the only way to answer that question is by determining whether or not he or she speaks boldly about Jesus.

It is not whether he or she speaks in tongues or does miracles.

The question is: “Does he or she witness boldly to Jesus?”

II. The Phenomenon of Fire

And second, the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit is seen in the phenomenon of fire.

Luke said that when the Holy Spirit filled the disciples, **“divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them.”** ([Acts 2:3](#)).

What does **fire** represent?

Let me direct your attention this time to two Old Testament texts.

Fire in the Old Testament represents God’s presence.

In [Genesis 15](#) we read of God making a covenant with Abraham.

God told Abraham to cut animals in two. In those days, the two parties then walked through the cut animals and took their vows.

Then Abraham fell into a deep sleep.

While Abraham slept, he saw “a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch,” which symbolized God’s presence, pass back and forth between the slain animals ([Genesis 15:17](#)).

A bit later in the Old Testament, we come to where God appeared on Mount Sinai.

There the presence of God was represented by fire. It was a holy presence. No one was allowed to climb up the mountain except for Moses, who was invited by God. If another person did, he or she would die.

We read in [Exodus 19:17–18a](#), “Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because *the Lord had descended on it in fire.*”

This is why the author of Hebrews wrote in [Hebrews 12:29](#), “For our God is a consuming fire.”

Perhaps the best way to understand more clearly the meaning of the fire is to ask: *What does fire do?*

Fire does two important things.

First, fire brings light. We tend to forget that fire is a source of light because we live in an age of electricity. When we think of light, we think of flipping a switch on a wall and having a bulb light up.

In the ancient world, there was no electricity. So light came either by the sun or by fire.

When the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples at Pentecost, the first experience they had was what we would call “spiritual illumination.”

That is why Peter could preach such a persuasive sermon. He understood the Old Testament as he had not understood it before. He was given the ability to preach to enlighten others who heard him preach.

Wherever the gospel of Jesus has gone into the world it has always brought enlightenment.

We know that apart from God's self-revelation men and women have no more than a faint idea of who God is.

But when the gospel comes, there is light.

People can see as they could not see before. God reveals himself to people's spiritual understanding and they can see who God is and what the gospel is.

And all of this is because of the work of the Holy Spirit.

And second, fire brings warmth. In the ancient world, fire was also a means of providing warmth.

In the same way, when the Holy Spirit is at work, one thing people notice is what we can call the warming of one's heart.

It is what John Wesley experienced when the Lord reached him in that little chapel in Aldersgate in London. He said as a result of hearing the gospel, "My heart was strangely warmed."

The problem is not just that the world we know is in darkness.

The world is also "out in the cold"—unwarmed, unloved, un comforted—until God draws near to us.

Christianity is meant to be a spreading flame.

Jesus said on one occasion, "I came to cast fire on the earth" ([Luke 12:49](#)). Jesus meant that a spiritual fire was destined to sweep over all the earth.

How do we know?

We know because of the way he spoke in commissioning his apostles. He said in [Acts 1:8](#): "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

This prophesied expansion of the Christian gospel began on the day of Pentecost.

That is why Luke tells us about the many people who were in Jerusalem and who heard the gospel on that day: **“Parthians and Medes and 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 Arabians”** ([Acts 2:9-11](#)).

People from all over the world heard the gospel.

These individuals, reached at Pentecost, spread out in all directions like a wildfire.

And in a very short time, they turned the world upside down.

Conclusion

What happened on the day of Pentecost was unique in one sense.

It was unique in that all the believers spoke in tongues.

In another sense, however, the day of Pentecost is a picture of what happens to all believers when we are filled with the Spirit.

When believers are filled with the Spirit of God, we tell others about Jesus.

And as we tell others about Jesus, people are enlightened and warmed by the good news of the gospel.

May God help all of us to be filled with his Spirit so that the gospel can be proclaimed to all around us. Amen.