

III. The Inauguration of the Kingdom

The Pentecost event has the distinction of being the salvation-historical hinge between the “age that was” and the “age that has come” – the age of preparation for the kingdom of God and the age of its realization and growth. The former was the domain of the fallen first creation; the latter is the domain of the new creation. Many wrongly regard Christ’s death as this hinge point, while others associate it with His resurrection. It is true that Jesus’ resurrection is the “firstfruits” of the new creation inasmuch as He is the Last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:12-23, 35-49; cf. also Romans 6:1-11), but the new creation – that is, the renewing of the created order – is directly the work of the creative and re-creative *Spirit*. Jesus’ resurrection life is the sure promise of life for Adam’s fallen race and the cursed creation, but that promise is fulfilled in and by the Holy Spirit.

The Old Testament scripture’s ubiquitous witness to Christ resides in its revelation and promise of the kingdom of God. And because this kingdom is the kingdom of the new creation, the Scripture’s treatment of it has a focal concern in the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit’s presence and power would enable the Davidic Servant/Branch to accomplish, through His self-offering, His appointed work of delivering and restoring the estranged creation (Isaiah 11:1-12, 42:1-7, 61:1-3). But He would do so, not simply by empowering the Servant for His work, but by being the divine agent of the creational recovery to come from that work (cf. Isaiah 44:1-5, 59:15-60:3; Ezekiel 36:16-36, 37:1-14; Joel 2:28-32; Zechariah 4:1-9 with 6:9-15).

Luke’s stated intention was to demonstrate the fulfillment of all the Scripture in Jesus and His kingdom, and this meant spotlighting the Spirit and His work. Thus He rightly made the Pentecost event a focal point of his two-fold narrative.

- Luke’s first account emphasizes the role of the Spirit in Jesus’ life and ministry as the messianic Servant (cf. Luke 1:5-17, 26-45, 57-79, 2:1-35, 3:1-22, 4:1-20, etc.), but it also treats the Spirit’s outpouring as the apex of promise (Luke 24:44-49). Luke then picked up this same theme of promise as he commenced his second account (Acts 1:1-26), moving immediately to the fulfillment of that promise on the day of Pentecost.
- From Luke’s vantage point, everything prior to Pentecost anticipated it and everything subsequent to it presupposed and built upon it. For this reason it is important to lay a solid foundation of understanding before proceeding forward in the book of Acts.

A. The Background of Pentecost: The Fulfillment of the Scriptures

The events of Pentecost stand as a major and critical point of salvation-historical fulfillment, and therefore of *scriptural* fulfillment because the salvation history is recorded and its development and outcomes predicted in the Scriptures. The outpouring of the Spirit is perhaps the most readily recognizable aspect of that fulfillment, but a complete treatment of Pentecost as salvation-historical fulfillment demands that other more foundational features be considered.

1. The first and most basic predictive issue respecting Pentecost is *typological* rather than directly prophetic. Long before the promise of the Holy Spirit took center stage, God was pointing to the day of Pentecost through the symbolism of Israel’s appointed feasts.

The fulfillment that occurred in Jerusalem ten days after Jesus' ascension had been predicted for nearly fifteen hundred years, all the way back to the time immediately following the Exodus. At Sinai Yahweh provided the covenant definition by which His relationship with His "new-born" covenant son was to be ordered, and part of that prescription included Israel's obligation to observe a series of *seven annual feasts*. Those feasts were to be celebrated on specified days, with each being connected in some way with Israel's agrarian seasons (Leviticus 23:4-44). The first four were observed in close order during Israel's spring barley and wheat season and the latter three in the fall.

- a. The spring feasts began with *Passover* on the 14th of Nisan, which functioned effectively as Israel's birthday celebration. The nation had been born – brought out of death into life – through Yahweh's great work of redemption, and therefore Passover was the first and preeminent of Israel's annual festal celebrations. It was so foundationally important that God made provision for a "make-up" Passover observance for those who couldn't keep the prescribed one. Thus there was no excuse for failing this obligation, so that any Israelite who didn't observe the Passover was to be cut off from the covenant household (ref. Numbers 9:1-13).
- b. Passover immediately preceded a week-long celebration known as the *Feast of Unleavened Bread*. All leaven had to be purged from Israelite homes prior to the Passover, and that condition – which focused on the people's abstention from eating anything leavened – continued for a period of seven days.
- c. Though instituted at Sinai, the third and fourth feasts weren't observed until Israel entered into Canaan and began to cultivate crops. The reason was that these feasts involved harvest offerings to the Lord (Leviticus 23:9ff).

Firstfruits was the first of the two and was to be observed on the first day after the Sabbath following Passover. (The best understanding is that this "sabbath" is the 15th of Nisan – the "holy convocation" that began the Feast of Unleavened Bread; Leviticus 23:6-7.) This feast occurred in connection with the beginning of the spring harvest season and involved the presiding priest presenting a barley sheaf to the Lord as an offering of the "first fruits" of the harvest. This act of consecration testified that Yahweh was Israel's provider (Psalm 147:14), but more specifically it symbolized Israel's confident trust in God's faithfulness to bring in the rest of the harvest. The firstfruit was the promise of the fullness to come.

The second of those harvest feasts was the *Feast of Weeks*, better known as Pentecost. Firstfruits was connected with the beginning of the spring harvest season; Pentecost with its culmination. Starting from the day of the Firstfruits sheaf offering, Israel was to count off seven sabbaths. Then on the day following that seventh Sabbath, the priest was to present a series of offerings to the Lord, including two loaves of bread made from the first of the wheat harvest (which followed the barley harvest). The name, "Feast of Weeks" (alternately, *Feast of the Harvest of the Firstfruits*) reflects this interval of seven weeks, which is also highlighted in the name, "Pentecost," from the Greek *pentecostos* ("fiftieth").

Israel's Feast of Weeks is the typological predecessor to the Pentecost fulfillment recorded by Luke (ref. Acts 2:1), and thus one would expect to find definitive points of correspondence between the two. A consideration of this feast shows this to be the case.

- 1) The first is that the focal point of the Feast of Weeks was the priest's presentation to the Lord of two loaves of bread.

"It was the first of the two agrarian festivals of Israel and signified the completion of the barley-harvest (Lev. 23:15, 16; Deut. 16:9, 10), which had begun at the time of the waving of the first ripe sheaf of the first-fruits (Lev. 23:11). Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks, therefore fell on the 50th day after this occurrence. The wheat was then also nearly everywhere harvested (Exo. 23:16; 34:22; Num. 28:26), and the general character of the festival was that of a harvest-home celebration. The day was observed as a Sabbath day, all labor was suspended, and the people appeared before Yahweh to express their gratitude (Lev. 23:21; Num. 28:26). The central feature of the day was the presentation of two loaves of leavened, salted bread unto the Lord (Lev. 23:17, 20; Exo. 34:22; Num. 28:26)." (ISBE Bible Dictionary)

"In Exo. 23:16, 19, 'the first (i.e. chief) of the firstfruits' are the two wave loaves of Pentecost (Lev. 23:17). The omer [sheaf] offering at Passover was the prelude to the greater harvest offering at Pentecost, before which no other firstfruits could be offered. The interval between Pentecost and tabernacles was the time for offering firstfruits. The Jews called Pentecost 'the concluding assembly of the Passover' ('atsereth)." (Fausset's Bible Dictionary)

The Feast of Weeks closed out what Firstfruits began, but with a crucially important difference: Whereas the Firstfruits sheaf offering was situated in the midst of the Feast of *Unleavened Bread*, the Pentecost loaf offering was to be *leavened*. This in itself was contrary to the common rule of the sanctuary, and the loaf offering was further distinguished by the fact that it was the only public (corporate) thank-offering under the Law. The Firstfruits and Pentecost offerings were bookends to the spring harvest, but the latter was presented to the Lord in a processed, leavened form rather than in its unprocessed, sheaf form.

- 2) Secondly, the context for the offering of the two loaves was a series of other offerings: a *sin* offering, a *burnt* offering and a *peace* offering. Ranked in order of offering, the sin offering was first and primary, followed by the burnt offering and then the peace offering. The order of these sacrifices was determined by their individual and relative significance. Because the burnt offering symbolized the offerer's entire surrender to God, it presupposed a state of blamelessness which is precisely what the sin offering symbolically effected. Once purged of his guilt and defilement and subsequently yielded to God, the worshipper enjoyed peace with Him. This happy condition was attested in the peace offering (which here functioned as a thank-offering – Leviticus 7:11-15), to which was added the other thank-offering of the two leavened loaves of bread (Leviticus 23:18-20).

- 3) Finally, the Feast of Weeks, along with the preceding Feast of Unleavened Bread and subsequent Feast of Ingathering (Feast of Tabernacles), formed a holy triad bounding Israel's calendar. The former two were associated with the beginning of the year and the spring harvest and the latter with the fall harvest at the end of the year. For these three feasts, every Israelite who was able was required to journey to the place where the tabernacle was located to appear before the Lord (Exodus 23:14-16; Deuteronomy 16:16). It was for this reason that Jerusalem was still full of Jewish pilgrims on the day of Pentecost (2:5-11). These had come to Jerusalem for the Passover and remained for the fifty days until Pentecost.

Pentecost was a harvest feast, highlighting the ingathering of the Lord's yield as the fulfillment of His promise expressed by the Firstfruits sheaf fifty days earlier. That ingathered harvest was symbolized by two loaves baked with leaven. This offering was presented to Yahweh in the context of sin, burnt, and peace offerings. In its particulars as well as its overall meaning, the Pentecost feast portrayed its future spiritual fulfillment.

- Like its prototypical predecessor, the Pentecost event recounted by Luke occurred fifty days after the Firstfruits offering (which was fulfilled in Jesus' resurrection).
- As well, God received on that day, as it were, two loaves representing a comprehensive harvest. Some have viewed these loaves as the *two houses of Israel*, now being reunited through union with the Son of David (cf. Jeremiah 31-33; Ezekiel 37; Hosea 1-3). Others see the fulfillment of this symbolism in the ingathering of both *Jew* and *Gentile* (Ephesians 2:11-22; cf. Galatians 3:1-29). ***Whichever view is held, the significance of the two-loaf symbolism is the same, for the prophets consistently linked the reunification of Israel and Judah and their reconciliation to God in the messianic age with the ingrafting of the Gentiles*** (Isaiah 11:1-12, 19:19-25, 49:1-6; cf. also Isaiah 54:1ff with Galatians 4:21-28; Hosea 1-2 with Romans 9:22-26; Amos 9:11-15 with Acts 15:1-21).
- And like the original Pentecost offering of the two loaves, God receives to Himself this new harvest offering in the context of *righteousness* (the sin offering), *consecration* (the burnt offering) and *peace* (the peace offering).

Pentecost was the middle of Israel's three harvest feasts, closing out the spring harvest season introduced by Firstfruits fifty days earlier. Though later Jewish tradition would associate Pentecost also with God's giving of the Law at Sinai, its primary harvest signification was not set aside. Thus the book of Ruth – whose story is set during the spring bare harvest in Israel – is the Megillot text read at Shavuot (Pentecost).

The Pentecost feast was a thank-offering to God for His faithfulness in bringing in His harvest. Israel had attested its trust in His faithfulness fifty days earlier when the priest waved the Firstfruits sheaf before Him on their behalf; at Pentecost they celebrated with joyful thanksgiving the Lord who had shown Himself faithful; the harvest promised by the firstfruit was coming in. So it was in Pentecost's fulfillment: *Christ, the firstfruits had been offered to God as a pledge of future ingathering; now that harvest was at hand.*

2. This principle of ingathering in the last days wasn't confined to Pentecost typology, but was a central feature of all Old Testament prophecy concerning the kingdom of God and the messianic age. Beginning with His germinal promise to overcome the serpent and his works, God revealed with ever-increasing clarity that His purpose was to reclaim and regather Adam's race and, ultimately, restore the whole of His creation to Himself. *As the Fall introduced alienation and exile to God's creation, so recovery from the Fall would effect reconciliation and ingathering.*
- a. The Exodus was the great prototype of this work as the Lord redeemed the sons of Israel and brought them to be with Him in His dwelling place (Exodus 15:17).
 - b. But this redemption of Abraham's descendents had reference to the preceding covenant in which God set apart Abraham and his seed to be the source of blessing to all the earth's families. Yahweh's deliverance and ingathering of Israel spoke of a greater global ingathering in which Israel would realize its own identity and calling. The first Exodus prefigured and promised a second Exodus.
 - c. Later, God drove away both houses of Israel into exile, but even before doing so He promised to restore His sanctuary and regather the remnant of Judah to Himself in Jerusalem (Isaiah 44:24-28; Jeremiah 29:1-10; cf. Ezra 1:1-4).
 - d. Overarching all this was God's promise of the "great and awesome Day of the Lord." Various events in Israel's history served as preliminary expressions of it, but this prophetic theme looked to a singular fulfillment that would usher in the messianic kingdom. At that time, the Lord would arise to judge and overthrow His enemies who had taken His people captive. Through that conquest He would liberate them and gather them back to His holy habitation where they would dwell with Him in undistracted devotion, joy, peace and security forever.

This theme has its final referent in the judgment of the world at Christ's return at the consummation of the age (cf. Isaiah 13:1-13; Ezekiel 30:1-26; Joel 1:14-2:11, 28-32; Amos 5:1-27; Zephaniah 1:1-18; Zechariah 14:1ff), but this referent is itself secondary and dependent. *That is, the judgment and restoration of all things at the last day are simply Christ's final reckoning in accordance with what He accomplished at Calvary* (Matthew 25:31-46). It was there that the theme of the Day of Yahweh found its singular fulfillment: There the true enemies of God, His people and His kingdom – namely, sin and death – were judged and vanquished; there the Lord delivered His own, reconciled them and restored them to Himself (cf. Isaiah 2:1-4 with 11:1-12 and Malachi 4:5-6 with Matthew 11:1-14, 17:1-13).

The Pentecost theme of ingathering is central to Old Testament promise, and this work is importantly assigned to the power and presence of the Spirit. The Spirit is the agent of this latter day recovery for the simple reason that it is *spiritual* rather than physical. Men are regathered, not to a physical sanctuary, but to God Himself. The fulfillment of the Pentecost ingathering is the reunion of God and man through the enlivening and indwelling work of the Spirit. Pentecost is fulfilled when the Spirit is poured out.