

Pentecost

Series on the book of Acts
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Why it is only possible for us to pray that the Spirit would come and fill us, isn't it, because of the day of Pentecost when we are told in the passage we read together that they were all filled and we want to pray just now that that is exactly what the Spirit would do for us as we gather.

Let's pray before we turn to God's Word.

Holy Spirit of God, we have been praying with the choir and from our hearts that you would come in your blessed presence and fill us now. We ask that as we come to your Word that the ministry of that Word would not simply be a ministry to our minds, but to our hearts. We pray in Jesus' strong name. Amen.

Well, it doesn't take a lot of imagination to see that things are not as they should be for humanity. And when you read the Bible you discover that things were not good for Israel. Israel historically was in a mess. It had been sent into exile during the reign of the Babylonians and the Babylonians had come and gone. The Persians had come and gone. The Greeks had come and gone. The Romans had come and would go. And still they are in exile. Jesus finds them in exile when he arrives and they are still in exile in Acts chapter two, the day of Pentecost when the Spirit comes.

And the problem with Israel, of course, is merely symptomatic of the problem of humanity at large. They are a specially privileged and blessed nation, but the reality is that humanity at large has a problem. It started with Adam and Eve, first spiritual death. Adam and Eve are out of sorts with God and that results ultimately in physical death, the separation not simply of the soul from God, but of the soul and the body from God forever.

Then there is a period in which there are hints and hopes of a restoration. First a spiritual restoration, a reconciliation between God and man. We saw hints of that in our opening reading from Ezekiel that God would come and resolve the issues, that he would cleanse away the sin and make it possible for people to have a good relationship with himself. And not just spiritual reconciliation, but a restoration of everything, a restoration of all

things, a cosmic universal restoration in which this fallen world in its entirety is resolved, renewed, transformed.

And the key to all of this focuses in on the person of the Lord Jesus Christ by his death, first of all by his life and then by his death he deals with the issues that are outstanding between humans and God, the issue of the fact that I don't live a perfect life and that when we come to that part in the service where I must confess that I have broken the law of God, I really mean it and I really need the cleansing and the pardon that is pronounced because I don't keep the law of God. But Jesus did. He did it on my behalf. He does it on behalf of his people. He is our representative. He is our proper man as Luther puts it.

And then in his death dying the death I should have died, not simply the physical death, but the death of the wrath of God, the death of judgment, the death of hell. He descends into that death on my behalf.

So on those two counts, my inability to live a life that I should live and my... the rightness of my dying a death that I should have died because being under the judgment of God Jesus deals with those in his death and in his life.

So he addresses the spiritual problem and he addresses the physical problem by rising from the grave. The resurrection of Jesus is the great hope in humanity of the resurrection of your body and my body and a renovation and a renewal and a restoration of all things. That is the way the story is going. Everything will be resolved in Jesus Christ.

And we must bear that in mind when we come to look at the story of Pentecost, because Luke as he describes the story of Jesus has been very clear from the beginning that he is talking about Jesus. This story is about not only what Jesus has done, but what Jesus is doing by the Holy Spirit in the world. The book of Acts is a book about Jesus. Luke tells us that in chapter one verse one.

And when we read about the Spirit we need to understand that we are listening to teaching about the Spirit of Jesus. The Spirit is a shy member of the godhead who loves to turn the attention onto the Lord Jesus. He does that throughout the book of Acts. It is a Christ focused Spirit.

So from the first chapter, then, we have this hint that preparation, we are all getting ready for the day of Pentecost and chapter two verse one begins, "When the day of Pentecost was fulfilled." That translation in the ESV, I know it sounds for extremely sound version, on this occasion it has hesitated to translate exactly what is there in the Greek.

"When the day of Pentecost was fulfilled they were all together."

Here is a prophetic climax. The same word that is used of the ascension of Jesus in Luke chapter nine when he is saying when that is fulfilled, when the ascension of Jesus comes and it is used that way elsewhere in the Greek version of the Old Testament as well.

Now what is Pentecost? Well, it was a harvest thanksgiving of sorts, 50 days after Passover, 10 days after the ascension of Jesus, celebrated at the conclusion of the barley harvest where the first cuttings of the harvest were kept, made into bread and offered for those at the end who completed the harvest as a reward for completing the harvest. It was a time to celebrate.

But it was also in Luke's time a time to remember the giving of the law at Sinai. There was the Passover which celebrated the great exodus from Egypt and then there was Pentecost that celebrated the giving of the law of Sinai and the fulfillment of the covenant. So the Pentecost festival came to be connected to the ideas of fulfillment and completion and finality.

Now that leads me to say some things before we look at the actual text and break it down for ourselves. Let me put it into its context for us. I think very often we rush. We read this and we rush to say, "Well, how does this apply to me in my life without reminding ourselves of the context of these words?"

First of all Pentecost was designed to equip the apostles to be the primary and authoritative witnesses of the Lord. We saw that last week. That is what chapter one is all about.

"You will be my witnesses. You have been with me from the beginning. You have seen these things happen. You will be by my witnesses. You wait in Jerusalem. You will be filled with the Spirit. Then you will bear witness to me."

Primarily, fundamentally, in the first place it was a promise to the apostles that they would be enabled and equipped by the Spirit to be witnesses to Jesus. And that was the way it always was.

You read the gospel and you discover that Jesus appointed the apostles. He appointed 12, designating them apostles that they might be with me, be with him.

In John chapter 15, "I chose you. You must testify. You must bear witness, for you have been with me from the beginning."

And so in Acts chapter one we read, "So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us..."¹

"One of these men must become with us a witness to the resurrection."

So what we saw last time is the completion of the 12 because of the defection and betrayal and denial of Peter, of Judas, the completion of the 12 so that the number of

¹ Acts 1:21-22.

chosen witnesses is now complete by the overruling hand of God, ready now for this final phase in their preparation to be Jesus' witnesses.

Now how does that affect me? Well, it affects me and you in this regard, that anything you know, anything we can ever know about Jesus Christ has to have the approval of the 12. Even the apostle Paul when he was converted had to go to Jerusalem and report in to the 12 who were able then to authenticate the fact that he had seen the risen Lord and was qualified to be this unique apostle to the Gentiles which the Lord Jesus had called him to be.

In John 17 Jesus says it is through their witness that we come to believe in him. Jesus prays, "I pray not only for them that you have given me, the 12, but I pray for all those who will believe in me through their witness."

Now we need to keep all of that in our minds when we read this language and not directly apply it to ourselves.

Why?

In John 17 it says Jesus had revealed or manifested the Father's name to them. He had made known to them the things the Father had told him. More than that, he had given them the words that the Father had given him and they had received them.

So whenever we read the story of Pentecost let's remember there are some things that are unique about it. It was, first of all, designed to equip the apostles to be the primary, authoritative witnesses to the Lord Jesus.

Secondly, Pentecost marks the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end, because with the outpouring of the Spirit we move into the last days. That is the days you and I are living in, the days between Jesus' returning to heaven and Jesus' coming back from heaven at the end of the age. This is the period of new covenant blessing. Now we are getting set up. Everything that is happening today is getting us all ready for that great final action of God. The next thing to expect in the economy of God is the return from heaven of our Lord Jesus and the cosmic renewal that he will bring about at his coming.

We live in the last days. And the presence of the Holy Spirit of which we have been singing, the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts is a foretaste, it is a down payment. The change that he has made in some of you... Before you became a Christian you had no thought of the things of God, no desire to obey God or love God. And you have been changed by the power of the Spirit and your very existence is a down payment. The God who renewed you is going to renew everything on the final day. The end of the beginning and the beginning of the end.

Thirdly, Pentecost is a natural completion of the exodus event accomplished by Jesus in his death and resurrection.

It was Luke who uses the word “exodus” to describe the departure of Jesus by means of the cross. That is the word that is used on the mount of transfiguration. Two men are talking with Jesus. Moses and Elijah appeared in glory with him and spoke of his exodus which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem.

Well, now this greater than Moses, this Lamb of God has died for the people and the two controlling promises that sum up the biblical understanding of Pentecost, therefore, are the words that we read in Ezekiel earlier in the service.

“I will put my Spirit within you.”²

Or the words from Jeremiah.

“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.”

And then, fourthly, Pentecost marked the first great assembly of the new Israel. That is the significance of the language that is used there in verse one.

“When the day of Pentecost was fulfilled, they...”

Who was thee they? Well, the apostles, the 12 and now significant others, group of others who have come together with them, 120 people.

And I think that multiplication of the 12 there is mean to make us understand that this is the complete Church here. This is the complete Israel of God that is gathered here in this upper room. And that is what is fulfilled and they are all together in one place. And I think it was last time we looked at various Scriptures in the Old Testament to show that that language of being together, all together, is used throughout the Old Testament of the people of God, the congregation of Israel as they gather for public worship, as they gather together as the people of God. So they are all gathered together in one place. It is the first day of the renewal of Israel, the restoration of Israel.

Well, they are all together in one place and something happens and that is a report that Luke gives us in chapter two, something that is unique, sudden, supernatural. It is not a natural event. There is nothing ordinary about this event. The Holy Spirit comes suddenly, he says verse two. Suddenly three things: a sound, a sight and a sign.

There was a sound.

“And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.”³

Luke reports it was the sound of a wind. It wasn't a physical wind. It was the sound of a mighty rushing wind. It sounded like a furious hurricane, mighty storm. This was the

² Ezekil3 36:27; 37:14.

³ Acts 2:2.

perfect storm sweeping through the upper room as the 120 believers gathered there together and the Spirit comes upon them.

Now how appropriate was that? You know that the word for Spirit in both Greek and in Hebrews, the word for Spirit is also the word for wind or breath or a mighty gale, a mighty wind of God. The Spirit is the mighty mover of God. He moves in God's purposes. And, for example, in the Old Testament the Spirit is the breath of life. In Genesis two it is the Spirit who breathes life into human beings making them living creatures. And throughout the Bible the Spirit then becomes identified with life not just with physical life, but with spiritual life.

In Ezekiel chapter 37 there is that great vision that Ezekiel is given, you remember, of the valley of the dry bones, "Them bones, them bones, them dry bones." They are all gathered at... that is twice in one day you have had the song. Sorry.

All of the bones are lying out there. They are dead, a great army of dead people. And Ezekiel is given this amazing thing to do. He is told he is preach to the bones. Preach to the bones. So he starts to preach to the bones and then you have, you know, all these things connected together. And I am not going to sing [?] for you.

All the bits come together. They reassemble. All of these bones are reassembled into men and horses and Ezekiel is told, "Preach to the bones again." He preaches to the bones again and flesh comes on them and sinews comes on them. And the Lord says, "There is something else you are to do. Preach to the bones. Preach to the bones again. Call the wind to sweep done upon the bones." And the wind of God moves on that mighty army and they live.

Why does God give Ezekiel that vision? God is saying, "This is what I am going to do. I am going to do this with Israel. I am going to sweep down through this nation that is devoid of power, helpless, useless, in rebellion against me. I am going to breathe into them into them the breath or the Spirit of life, the mighty wind of God, the breath of life."

And as the wind sweeps through this upper room you are to understand this is the background of it. The breath of life is breathed into the lives of these people. This is a new humanity that is being formed. This is a new Israel that is being regathered.

But there is the also the connection that I noted earlier between the Passover and Sinai, because on Sinai when God gave the law on Sinai there was also a mighty storm that swept around Mount Sinai and the people were afraid. They were terrified. And so the same storm that afflicted the people when the law was given at Sinai now is sweeping through this room where these people are gathered. Only this time it is a positive thing. There is nothing to be afraid of at this stage. The sound is the sound of the Spirit of God.

On Sinai the terrifying thing were the trumpet blasts. The breath of God sounded like mighty trumpets that were being blasted. The people heard it and were afraid.

So there was a sound. And it was a sound of the Spirit of God.

Then, secondly, there was a sight. They saw something there. They saw—and notice how it is put here.

“And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them.”⁴

They saw, in other words, what looked like ... it looked like one thing that then divided and rested on each one of them individually. So one thing that divides and rests on them all and it looks like a tongue, a flame of fire that divides them then with each individual a flame of fire rests on each one of them. That is what they saw.

Now, again, this doesn't happen out of the blue. Throughout the Bible flames of fire are regular indicators of the glorious presence of God. First the lightning at Sinai, but remember the burning bush when Moses meets God and has the encounter with God and the bush is blazing, but it is not consumed. The fire speaks of the holiness of God.

“Take off your shoes from off your feet. The ground on which you are standing is holy ground.”

And when the children of Israel are being led through the desert, do you remember, there was that pillar of fire by night and cloud by day that led them on their journey toward the Promised Land. And whenever it stopped, they stopped. And whenever it moved, they moved. The mighty pillar of fire and cloud was the pillar of the holiness of God's glory.

And when they consecrated the tabernacle and later when they consecrated the temple, what happened? This mighty pillar of fire descends and rests right on the holy of holies. It is an indicator of the presence of God, the presence of the holiness of God. And here we have in the upper room, do you notice this as God pours out his Holy Spirit upon these people? Each believer is marked by a miniature pillar of fire. Each believer is, in a sense, becomes the repository of the pillar of the glory of God that had once rested in the tabernacle and the temple. The Spirit rests on each believer.

Why?

Paul tells us why. Each believer is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Each believer, Peter can write to Christians and say, “Look, when you are persecuted and you are despised by people, remember this,” he says, “Remember the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you,” an amazing thing to say to ordinary people like you and to me. The spirit of glory and of God rests upon us.

This pillar of fire represents the presence of the purifying Spirit of God.

Paul argues, for example, he argues that whenever we are suffering, whenever we are struggling as believers and we suffer in his name, remember that suffering is not a sign of

⁴ Acts 2:3.

God's absence, but it is the presence of the purifying Spirit making us more and more ready for glory.

But there is another aspect to this sight. What they saw looked like fire. There is another side to the fire thing and the other side to the fire thing is that fire burns. It not only warms, it burns. And John the baptizer earlier in the life of Jesus had promised that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And the language he uses and the imagery he uses is that Jesus would gather the wheat of God's harvest together and he would consume the chaff, gather the wheat, consume the chaff, because the fire symbolizes and makes visible the presence of God in the two fold sense in which God radiates light that gives understanding and destroys sin through heat, burns it up, destroys it utterly. The fire pictures the consuming holiness of a living God.

You can't stand in the presence of God and not be consumed. Isaiah the prophet found that, didn't he? In Isaiah chapter six he tells the story of his call. There he is. He goes into the temple. He goes into the temple and he sees the Lord high and exalted, his train filling the temple. He hears the angels crying, "Holy, holy, holy," and he is consumed. He says to God, "I am coming apart. I am disintegrating in your presence. I cannot keep it together any longer. I am an unclean man and I am in the presence of the holy God."

The Bible says, "Our God is a consuming fire."⁵

But do you see the gospel in this story? On the day of Pentecost the Lord Jesus comes with fire to his people, but he does not yet bring the final fire, the final conflagration that will destroy everything that is evil and everything that is sinful on the final day of judgment. On this day judgment is withheld, mercy is demonstrated. The fire falls, but it does not consume. The fire falls, but it does not destroy. The fire of God's glory rests upon the simple belief.

Today it is the joy of every believer in this room that we possess the Spirit of God. The Spirit of glory and of God rests on us.

So there was a sound and there was a sign and then there was a speech. A sign of a language that they spoke.

This is what it ways.

"And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit."⁶

The prayer that we sang earlier, the choir were praying. That prayer was fulfilled for these people in this upper room. On that day of Pentecost they were all filled with the Spirit. They all knew. They understood what that meant. In the Old Testament when people were filled with the Spirit they were enabled to do great things. They were

⁵ Hebrews 12:29.

⁶ Acts 2:4.

enabled to do something for God, to act for God, to speak for God. The filling of the Spirit enables speech. That is what it does here.

Later on in Acts when they are persecuted and they are afraid and they are praying and they pray to God for help, what happens? They are filled with the spirit and they speak. They just leave that room and they go out and with boldness they say what God has done.

The Holy Spirit fills the Church so that the Church might articulate the gospel. The first thing you learn here about the filling of the Spirit is that it comes to stimulate speech about the wonders of God. And do you notice what happens? They speak the wonders of God and there is a reversal of that terrible thing that happens right at the beginning of the Bible when God confuses the languages of the people so they can no longer communicate with one another. You know what that is like. You go somewhere you have never been before. You find yourself in a foreign language. You talk about kitchen roll when you should be talking about paper towels. And there is all kinds of other things you do. You talk about a boot instead of a trunk or a bonnet instead of a hood. This relates to automobiles. But there are worse things. I found myself in Bulgaria once on my own on a mountain in a motel that used to be run by the Communists. I was speaking at a youth thing and they were, the young people, were up at a camp at the top of the hill and I was parked in this supposedly luxurious place—well, you had to use imagination for that—on my own in this 50 bed place on my own. And I woke up in the middle of the night to hear some voices outside. I thought the Gestapo had come for me just to kind of mix metaphors here, to come and take me away. I couldn't understand a word that was going on.

Now I wasn't afraid or anything like that. I just locked the door. I put the chair against the door to make sure nobody got in. I hid under the bed. I wasn't scared at all.

You know, not being able to understand the language is a dreadful thing, isn't it? It confuses. There is confusion right there in Babel, right at the very beginning of the Bible, the story of Babel is the story of how God confuses the languages as a way of dividing up the world, of minimizing man's ability to rebel against God, but also as an indicator that sin breaks relationships, pushes us into our little ghettos, into our little groups, into our little geographical area.

Do you see? On the day of Pentecost what happens? There is a reversal of this. These people come spilling out onto the streets and they are speaking in other languages, languages they have never learned themselves. They have never been to school. Some of these people are told were uneducated people. They had never been to school. And here they are articulating in other languages the wonderful works of God.

Do you know it even says more than that? There is two words used for the languages that are spoken here. One word is a word for language. The other words is a word for dialect. It is the Greek word of dialect. So there were even minor local phrases that you could only know. I mean, if you went to the northeast of England, I wouldn't understand what they were saying in the northeast of England. They are English, but, indeed, they also

have a strange language up there. It is just hard. But if you could go there and speak in their dialect, my goodness, they would be amazed.

I will say no more in case I get into trouble afterwards.

Oh, the point is, of course, that what they were doing in the day of Pentecost was they were speaking the wonderful works of God and they were doing it in other languages so that people—and do you notice we have one of... this great description of the people where they came from. They came from Mesopotamia and Judea and Cappadocia and Pontus and Asia and Phrygia and Pamphylia and Egypt and many parts of Libya and Rome and so on. They came from all around the then known world. They were all gathered together, because what is happening here, you see, on this day of Pentecost is this. This is the first day, this is the first day of the final restoration of all things. It is the restoration of the Israel. The 12 are there. And now the Spirit is fulfilling them in fulfillment of the promises. It is the restoration of the world. For suddenly language is no longer a barrier. Suddenly the people are hearing the message.

Yes, it seems confused to begin with because people are... all of these people, 120 of them, men and women are speaking. They are saying what they have to say even though they have never learned what they are saying. Perhaps don't even know what they are saying and the people in the crowd are listening in. They are hearing somebody talking Russian and they are thinking, "What is that?" And then they turn around and somebody else is speaking their language and they understand it.

And so people as they were listening to them, would find somebody at some point in the crowd just talking their language and they are saying, "How can these people do this?" Totally supernatural. It is a reversal of the confusion of Babel. It is a proclamation of good news.

You know, on Mount Sinai it was the job of Moses to go down the mountain and proclaim the law to the children of Israel. Here on the day of Pentecost these people spill out on to the streets, but they are not proclaiming the law. They are proclaiming the gospel. It is a better message than Sinai. They are calling people to Jesus. They are talking to people about Jesus and they are inviting people to come to Jesus.

This speech underlines the missionary aspect of what is going on on the day of Pentecost because this goes on throughout the book of Acts. So, for example, when the first Gentile convert is baptized, he, too, speaks in other languages. Peter recognizes those languages and identifies it as magnifying God.

Do you notice the emphasis, will you? How it is that with perfect clarity they are proclaiming the gospel.

Verse five says, "Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven."⁷

⁷ Acts 2:5.

Here is Israel now being restored by God. And what we see happening there on that day of Pentecost is a foretaste of the great assembly in heaven. They were all together and they spoke the wonderful works of God and people understood them.

On that great day of assembly in heaven we are told in Revelation chapter seven, a great multitude that no one can count from every nation, tribe, language, people, all of them are there because of the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on earth to every nation, tribe and language and people the eternal gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. A powerful thing that God is doing on this day at Pentecost.

William Cameron Townsend who is the founder of the Wycliffe Bible Translators makes this point. He says, "The greatest missionary is the Bible in the mother tongue. It never needs a furlough and never is considered a foreigner." The Bible in the mother tongue.

And what was the effect of this great work on the day of Pentecost on these people? Well, it enabled them to bear witness to Jesus, the Messiah.

Matthew Henry comments that the significance of Pentecost is to dignify and so to distinguish these people as messengers from heaven so that like Moses at the burning bush, this crowd in Jerusalem will turn aside and see this great sight. God is speaking to the nations.

So my question is: Is the day of Pentecost relevant to us today? Well, it is relevant. Yes, it is relevant. It is not relevant in the sense that we need to repeat it, because it has happened. Been there, done that. The people who were there got their Pentecost t-shirts. Well, we weren't there. We weren't there. It is all done with. It has happened. The Spirit is now here.

Pentecost was a major moment in the life of the Church. It starts the movement. Pentecost is significant because starts a movement within Israel, in Jerusalem. A work of renewal begins that very day as we will see later. Three thousand are converted. That movement will spread to the rest of Judea, then Samaria. There will be a reconciliation between the two broken halves of Israel. And then it will go in this book and will go all the way to Rome. The work has begun.

Pentecost puts the Holy Spirit's work up front and central in the life of the believer today. What does he do then? And what does he do today? Well, he makes Jesus real to you. He makes Jesus real to you. He makes Jesus' words available to you. You can hear his words. You can read his words.

The Holy Spirit makes Jesus' power available to you.

How do I live a life that pleases God? Well, not in my own strength. How do I live a life that overcomes in hardship? Not in my own strength. How do I know that one day, how do I know that one day this frail, broken, dying piece of flesh will be raised up in

splendid glory? How do I know it? Because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon me. There is no other explanation. There is no other explanation as to why I see what is in the Bible and someone else doesn't, why I believe in Jesus and someone else doesn't, why I have affections, holy affections for Jesus and other people don't. No explanation at all apart from the Spirit of the living God.

Well, let's pray that we would be filled with the Spirit.

Father, we pray that you would fill us this evening once again. Refresh our souls. Renew us and revive us we ask you in Jesus' strong name. Amen.