

C. The Meaning of Pentecost: The Inauguration of the New Creation (2:14-21)

What transpired on that Jerusalem street was arresting. The gathering crowd were drawn to a large group of Israelites all speaking in different languages and dialects, and as they stood listening they began to recognize their own native tongue among the multitude of voices. At that time they took note of the fact that everyone speaking was Galilean. Startled, confused, and perhaps even a little afraid, some responded as men commonly do under such circumstances: They began deriding the disciples, accusing them of being drunk. That accusation provided the opportunity for Peter's explanation of what was occurring. The Spirit had gathered these Jews and proselytes through the sign of tongues-speaking; now He would declare to them plainly through Peter's words in his own language (probably Greek) the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Of first importance is that Peter, under the Spirit's leading, recognized the Pentecost phenomenon to be a matter of *scriptural fulfillment*. And that not merely with respect to the outpouring of the Spirit and its attendant tongues-speaking, but, more importantly, in terms of the larger significance of Pentecost as it completed the preceding "Christ event."

a. It's noteworthy that Peter could have simply told the Jewish crowd that they were witnessing what *Jesus Himself* had promised, but instead he referred it to the Scriptures. The reasons are evident: First, among the Jews and proselytes gathered before Peter, few had any real knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth. They had come to Jerusalem from the distant Near East and Mediterranean regions, and Jesus' ministry had been localized in Palestine.

But more than that, it would have been insufficient and unconvincing to attach what was happening to the words of a mere man, especially one whom many of the Jews regarded as a false prophet. If this multitude had learned anything about Jesus from their Jewish brethren during their fifty days in Jerusalem, it was that He was an impostor falsely claiming to be Israel's Messiah.

b. If Peter were to convince the crowd that what was transpiring that day was God's work in fulfillment of His word of promise, he would have to tie it to the Scriptures. What they were witnessing was not drunken men, but God pouring out His Spirit, and this was demonstrably a matter of scriptural fulfillment.

2. Peter could have referred his audience to a number of passages in the prophets, but he chose to cite from the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28-32). The most apparent reason why the Spirit led him to this passage is that it is the most explicitly *universal* of all the contexts promising His coming. Isaiah and Ezekiel predicted the Spirit's outpouring, but specifically for the purpose of bringing life to the desolated and fractured houses of Israel (Isaiah 44:1-5; Ezekiel 36:16-37:28, 39:25-29; cf. also Isaiah 59:20-21).

a. That day, God was indeed fulfilling His pledge to revive and restore the sons of Israel, but He was also beginning His work of blessing the nations as promised to Abraham. He was poised to give His Spirit to devout Gentiles as well as Jews.

- b. The promise of universal participation in the Spirit's outpouring is the heart of this section of Joel's prophecy, which made it the perfect Scripture to interpret as well as authenticate the Pentecost event – first for those standing before Peter, but also for the world of men in that generation and the generations to come.
3. Peter (and Luke after him) cited from Joel in order to lead men to recognize in Pentecost God's fulfillment of scriptural promise, but that recognition is only the starting point. More important is the meaning of Pentecost as scriptural fulfillment: *In what ways and to what extent did Pentecost fulfill Joel's prophecy?* This is where Christian theologians begin to diverge.
- Not surprisingly, dispensationalists typically perceive at most a very narrow fulfillment (if not merely an analogous example) associated with Joel's promise of the outpouring of the Spirit; the balance of Joel's prophecy – even within the specific passage Peter cited from – is said to pertain to the *nation of Israel* and its salvation and restoration at the end of the age leading into the Millennial Kingdom (cf. 2:18-27, 3:1-3, 9-21).
 - For their part, those who embrace Covenant Theology see a much wider dimension of fulfillment. The reason is the strong continuity this theological system maintains between Old Covenant Israel and the New Covenant Church. Christ's Church is "Israel" in the present "new" administration of the one "covenant of grace," and thus God's promises to His people *Israel* amount to promises to the Church.

These theological systems notwithstanding, the answer to the above question lies in the careful application of fundamental biblical and hermeneutical principles:

- First and foremost is the principle of ***Christological fulfillment***. That is, Peter's citation must be interpreted according to the principle that the New Testament writings provide the inspired interpretation of the Scriptures – the Old Testament – as they have been fulfilled in Jesus. *The meaning of a given Old Testament passage is determined by the New Testament as it interprets that passage (directly or indirectly) in relation to Jesus Christ.*
- Second, this Christological fulfillment is a matter of ***sensus plenior*** ("fuller sense"). This full, canonical (Christological) sense that the New Testament gives to an Old Testament passage doesn't in any way ignore or deny the contextual meaning of that passage. Rather, *the canonical sense (sensus plenior) is the extension of the contextual sense along the line of Christological fulfillment.*

So, for instance, the fact that the Passover ordinance finds its ultimate meaning in the person and work of Christ doesn't deny its historical meaning. Quite the opposite, the ultimate meaning depends upon and extends out of the contextual meaning: One cannot discern how Christ is the Passover unless and until he understands the Passover as it existed and functioned in its own historical context.

- Finally, the context of a given passage is the entire *biblical storyline*. Because the Old Testament is the progressive and organic revelation of God's redemptive purpose and scheme, consideration of a given passage's context must go beyond merely the surrounding content or the book itself; it must extend to the entire Old Testament corpus as it is understood in its own flow and state of development. *Studying a passage's context means examining its salvation-historical context, not simply its historical and literary context.*

Under the leading of the Spirit, Peter recognized that this particular section of Joel's prophecy supplies the meaning and import of the Pentecost event; discerning that meaning depends upon rightly applying the principles above.

- a. The place to begin is with the larger context of the passage Peter referred to. The exact date of Joel's prophecy is indeterminate, but internal evidence seems to place it early among the writing prophets, probably in the ninth century B.C. The book is divided into two parts:
 - 1) The first section (1:1-2:17) concerns God's judgment on His covenant people because of their unfaithfulness. Thus the prophecy opens with Joel's account of a locust plague which, together with drought and the fires that result from it, had left the land of Israel desolate (1:1-20). Whether these things were historical or merely metaphorical, Joel intended them as symbols for a coming day of Yahweh's indignation (the "Day of the Lord" – 1:14-15) which he associated with an impending invasion of Judah and its ultimate desolation and captivity (2:1-11). Some argue that Joel was referring to the Assyrian invasion during the reign of Hezekiah, while others believe he was speaking of the Babylonian invasions and conquest. Either way, Joel described that invading army under the imagery of an innumerable swarm of locusts that devours everything in its path.
 - 2) The first part of Joel's prophecy concerns God's judgment; the latter part His mercy in bringing renewal and restoration to His people (2:18-3:21). Yahweh was going to punish and purge, but His goal was recovery and blessing, not destruction. His desolating hand would turn when His judgment was complete, and, by His outpoured Spirit – the Spirit of re-creation – Yahweh was going to bring renewal to His creation and the blessing of everlasting perfection and fullness (3:16-18).
- b. This promise of reconciliation and renewal/restoration by the Spirit is the framework for the passage Peter drew upon (2:28-32), and the focal point of it is Joel's insistence that Yahweh's outpouring of His Spirit would have universal implications: In that day He was going to pour out His Spirit "*on all flesh*" (in the context of the prophecy, "all flesh" likely means male and female, old and young, freeman and servant *within the household of Israel*. Nonetheless, this would constitute a radical expansion of the Spirit's active presence among Yahweh's people as compared with the theocratic kingdom as Joel knew it.)

- c. Yahweh's pledge of His Spirit is importantly woven together with His promise of deliverance associated with another manifestation of the "Day of the Lord" – a day of judgment that embraces all nations (cf. 2:30-32 with 3:1-2). In context, God was assuring His people that all who called upon Him in that day of His fiery indignation would find escape. Judgment and wrath were coming upon Zion just as surely as upon the Gentile nations, but Yahweh promised that a remnant would survive to participate in His subsequent renewal and restoration.
- d. In referring Joel's prophecy to Pentecost, Peter directly applied his promise of the universal outpouring of the Spirit: "*These men are not drunk, as you suppose... but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel:... 'I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all flesh...'*" At the same time, he made some notable changes to Joel's language and contextual meaning, each of which highlights the principle of Christological fulfillment.
- 1) First of all, he subtly transposed the sense of Joel's assurance of deliverance. What, in the context of the prophecy, was God's vow to deliver those calling upon Him in the day of His wrath became, in Peter's interpretation, the promise of salvation for those who repent and put their faith in the risen and enthroned Christ (cf. Acts 2:21 with vv. 37-40).
 - 2) Connected with this transposition was an equally subtle shift in referent: Yahweh was to be the object of Israel's petition in the context of Joel's prophecy; in Peter's interpretation, Jew and Gentile alike were exhorted to call upon the name of the Lord who is Jesus Christ (2:36).
 - 3) He also altered Joel's introductory phrase from "*it will come about after this...*," to "*it will be in the last days...*" This alteration is effectively Peter's interpretation of Joel's words: Under the Spirit's leading, Peter discerned that the era Joel specified in his prophecy corresponds in fulfillment to the "last days" – what Paul designated alternately as the "*fullness of the time*" and "*the ends of the ages*" (1 Corinthians 10:11; Galatians 4:4). The "last days" refers to the messianic age initiated by the "Christ event" which culminated in Jesus' sending of His Spirit (cf. also Isaiah 2:1-4, 9:1-7, 11:1-12 and Hosea 3:1-5 with Hebrews 1:1-2).

In Joel's prophecy, this time of the Spirit's outpouring is preceded by Yahweh's pledge to restore the desolate land and make it fruitful again ("*After this...*"). Moreover, this work of restoration would extend to Yahweh's people: He would deal wondrously with them and again dwell in their midst; never again would they be put to shame (2:18-27).

- This dynamic highlights an apparent problem within Joel's larger prophecy, namely the fact that God's promised renewal/restoration appears to occur in history prior to His outpouring of His Spirit.

- This arrangement seems to violate the order presented elsewhere in the Old Testament (and realized in the New Testament). So in Ezekiel and Isaiah, the outpouring of the Spirit is the *foundation* for recovery, not subsequent to it (ref. Isaiah 32:11-18; 44:1ff; Ezekiel 36-37).

Some have sought to resolve this problem by viewing Joel's wording as indicating *logical* progress in terms of the flow of his argumentation rather *temporal* progress in terms of sequential fulfillment, but this explanation doesn't fit well with the temporal sense of the Hebrew expression.

A better explanation is to understand the phrase, "*after this*" – which introduces the outpouring of the Spirit – as pointing back to God's promise to restore the earlier and latter rains (ref. v. 2:23 as part of the larger promise of vv. 21-26). *The connection between these two promises resides in the imagery of water which God pours out of heaven in order to bring life and fruitfulness to that which is dead and desolate.* The promise to "pour out" the living water of the Spirit is the greater, spiritual counterpart of the promise to renew the land following its desolation at the hands of the locust-like hordes of the "northern army" (2:18-20).

- 4) Peter also interjected the addendum, "*and they shall prophesy,*" most likely to emphasize to his hearers that what they were witnessing was the fulfillment of Joel's promise that the Spirit's outpouring would be attended by prophesying – Spirit-filled men testifying to God's mighty saving works in His Son (cf. Acts 2:18b with 2:17b).
- 5) Finally, Peter's inclusion in his citation of the "signs and wonders" portion of Joel's prophecy seems at first glance to be foreign and inappropriate. In the Joel context, this language is associated with cosmic upheaval and natural cataclysm leading up to the "*great and awesome day of the Lord*" (2:30-31); how, then, did Peter understand this language to coincide with the events and significance of Pentecost?

One explanation – but not a satisfying one – is that, because Peter was concerned with the beginning and end of the Joel passage (vv. 28-29 and 32), it was most natural for him to cite the whole thing. Verses 30-31 don't find fulfillment in Pentecost, but they bind together the sections of the passage that do.

But would Peter's hearers have recognized this nuance? He prefaced his citation by indicating to the crowd that it explained what was unfolding before their eyes, and in reciting it he made no distinction between its various components. Peter clearly intended for his audience to see in the Pentecost phenomenon fulfillment of Joel's words as he recounted them in their entirety ("*This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel:...*").

As it pertains to 2:30-31, the crowd was to recognize that what they were experiencing was a mighty move of God that had profound implications for and impact upon the whole created order. The totality of the “Christ event” – culminating that day with Pentecost – was a display of divine power bringing about a crisis for the entire creation: “signs and wonders” in heaven and on earth testifying of divine judgment (darkness, blood, fire and vapor of smoke) and the upheaval of re-creation and recovery.

“The last days would be days of crisis, as Joel’s prophecy showed... God’s intervention brings trauma as well as relief, judgment as well as blessing. The ‘wonders and signs’ include the miracles of Jesus’ earthly ministry (which Peter calls ‘acts of power and wonders and signs,’ Acts 2:22), but also the darkening of the sun during Jesus’ crucifixion (Luke 23:44-45), his resurrection (Luke 11:29-30), and the heavenly wind, fiery tongues, and spoken tongues of Pentecost.”

(Dennis Johnson, The Message of Acts)

In summary, the first post-Pentecost sermon – and one preached under the filling and direct leading of the Holy Spirit – powerfully reinforces and clarifies by explicit example Jesus’ own insistence that all the Scripture testifies of Him. Peter’s sermon demonstrates the core biblical principle that the New Testament is the record and interpretation of the Old Testament’s fulfillment in Christ. Out of this truth flow the previous interpretive principles of *Christological fulfillment*, *sensus plenior*, and the *biblical storyline* as the context of any given passage.

Joel’s language and imagery in this passage must be understood, not only within the broader context of his entire prophecy, but also in relation to their place in and contribution to God’s developing revelation of redemption: The passage must be read and interpreted in terms of what the Spirit of God had already revealed and promised to that point in salvation history, but also in the light of the whole canon of Scripture; that is, as the prophecy looks toward and finds its true meaning in Jesus Christ, His gospel, and His kingdom.

If not before, Peter had that day come to recognize that the Spirit is the *Spirit of prophecy* (ref. 1 Peter 1:10-11; 2 Peter 1:20-21). Joel’s words were His, and His intention in them was to testify of the One to come: The substance and soul of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus (Revelation 19:10). So, as the Spirit directed Peter’s mind toward Joel’s prophecy, He did so as the promised *Witness*, glorifying Jesus by taking what is His and disclosing it to His own so that they should proclaim Him to the sons of Israel and all the families of the earth (John 15:26-27, 16:13-15).

This, then, was Peter’s proclamation to the multitude, explained and applied in his ensuing words (2:22-36): *Men of Judea and you who are residing in Jerusalem, listen to me: Just as Joel prophesied, in these last days God has poured forth His Spirit so that all His people should be His prophetic instruments. Moses longed for this day (Numbers 11:25-29) and God pledged it repeatedly through His prophets. But know that this ‘sign’ of prophetic proclamation in the power of the Spirit stands upon greater signs and wonders associated with the Day of Yahweh also promised by Joel – the day of His visitation in which He judged and conquered His enemies in His Servant Jesus and secured deliverance for all who will call upon Him in faith.*