

Day of Pentecost (Acts 2)

I'm sure you have a sense of the passage of time since Resurrection Sunday, on March 27. If Resurrection Sunday in 2005 had been the very first Resurrection Sunday, and if you had been one of the followers of Christ in those days, the last two months or so would have been the most exciting and dramatic days of your life.

You would have seen the depths of despair in the arrest, trials, suffering and death of Christ, only to begin hearing three days later thrilling reports that He had risen from the dead. Jesus appeared first to a few, and then later to many, on one occasion appearing to over five hundred at one time. People not only saw Him, but talked with Him – they experienced the give and take of conversation with Him. They touched Him. They even ate with Him.

These were not private, mystical experiences, but shared by everyone who happened to be present when Jesus manifested Himself. Did you ever see something so unusual that you said to someone, “Did you see that?” or, “Do you see what I see?” You want to make sure your senses aren't deceiving you. When the risen Christ appeared in those days, if someone said, “Did you see that?,” the answer was always, “I sure did!”

This went on for forty days, until about ten days ago (if this were year of Jesus' death & resurrection). Ten days ago Christ would have given some final teachings and instructions, and before the apostles' very eyes He was lifted up into heaven.

Even before His crucifixion, Jesus made this promise: *“I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever, that is, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you”* (John 14:16-17).

Soon afterward Jesus said to the disciples, *“But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you”* (John 16:7-15).

After His death and resurrection, & immediately before His ascension, Jesus was much more specific in His instructions: *“And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, ‘which,’ He said, ‘you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now’”* (Acts 1:4-5).

The disciples ask follow-up question, one not exactly in sync with God's program: *“So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, ‘Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth”* (Acts 1:6-8).

And so, they returned to Jerusalem, and there were ten days between the ascension of Christ and the arrival of His promise. Luke gives us some indications of what these days were like. In Luke 24:52-53, he tells us, *“And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple, praising*

God.” In Acts 1:13 he speaks of *“an upper room, where they were staying.”* It must have been a very large room because at one point at least there were 120 people in it (Acts 1:15). Acts 1:14 says, *“These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.”*

So these were not days of inactivity – like a rainy day when you are on vacation, playing games or taking naps and waiting for the sun to come out. These were days of fervent prayer and worship. When they were not praying in the house where they were staying, they were in the temple praising the Lord. And when they weren’t in the temple praising the Lord, they were praying in the house where they were staying.

I wonder if they remembered Jesus’ words that are recorded for us in Luke 11:13, *“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?”*

Luke does tell us about selection of Matthias to take the place of the traitor Judas among the Twelve, but now it’s the Day of Pentecost. Today actually is the Day of Pentecost. I wanted to make sure this Sunday was the Day of Pentecost, and it wasn’t printed on my calendar, so I did a Google Search on the computer, entering *“Pentecost date 2005”* The top site that came up said, *“Meet single Pentecostals in your area.”*

As the disciples kept on praying and worshipping and waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit, I wonder if they had any special anticipation that the Day of Pentecost would be the day?

Pentecost marked the climax of the grain harvest in Israel. Leviticus 23 instructs the priests to make a wave offering of two *leavened* loaves on the 50th day after Passover. Pentecost means “fifty”, and Pentecost also sometimes called Feast of Weeks (after the seven weeks after Passover). It was also called the Feast of the Ingathering because of the grain harvest. Although the Bible doesn’t say that the Law was given to Moses fifty days after Passover, traditionally the Jews also celebrate the giving of the Law at Pentecost.

I wonder if the disciples anticipated a prophetic significance in the Day of Pentecost? The prophetic significance of the feast of Passover was already clear - Jesus was our Passover lamb, “the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.” I wonder if there was any anticipation that Pentecost, too, would prove prophetic - that just God gave Moses the Law, He would send the Holy Spirit who would enable us to keep and obey the Law, and write the law on our hearts within. Or that there would on that day be a great “ingathering” of souls? Or that Jew & Gentile would be one body in Christ? We can’t tell whether their anticipation was heightened, but something big was about to happen!

In Acts 2 we read, *“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. They were amazed and astonished, saying, “Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ”And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? ”Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs--we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.” And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others were mocking and saying, ‘They are full of sweet wine’” (Acts 2:1-13).*

Boy, that question in verse 12 really says it all – “What does this mean?” I won’t pretend that I’ll be able to answer that question fully in a few minutes. I won’t even pretend that I *could* if I could keep you here all day! It seems to us like Luke has left a lot unsaid. If we were here, we would have some follow-up questions. Tell us more about whatever it was that looked like fire coming to rest on them. And who is it exactly who experienced these things? Was it the twelve only, or did it include a larger group like the 120 mentioned in Acts 1:15? The closest antecedent to the “they” in 2:1 is clearly the Apostles alone. Jesus promises for this Holy Spirit empowerment were given to the Apostles. Those who heard the tongues identified all the speakers as “Galileans.” That seems like an unlikely comment if over 100 people were speaking. In a few verses, Peter is going to make his defense “taking his stand w/ the eleven” (2:14). But there are more than twelve languages & dialects listed, so maybe it was a larger group. The text just doesn’t say!

And what did they experience, exactly? Was it that they suddenly had the ability to speak in foreign languages which they had never studied or learned? If you opt for that, you have difficulty with 1 Corinthians 14:2, where Paul says, “*the one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries . . .*” Or was it something like “ecstatic utterance” that the devout present (genuine God-fearers and God-seekers like Cornelius in Acts 10) *heard* in their own language and dialect, while “others” (non-devout) simply dismissed what they heard as drunken slurs – so much babbling and nonsense?

I asked one of our elders yesterday what he thought. Elders are supposed to be “able to teach,” right? I asked, “In Acts 2, do you think the ‘tongues’ were human languages that the Apostles had never studied or learned, or ecstatic utterance that the devout were given the ability to understand?” He said, “How do I know – I wasn’t there!?”

That’s part of the problem! The text doesn’t say! Luke, under the inspiration of this same Holy Spirit, obviously had other revelatory priorities! He did not concern himself with satisfying our curiosity about all these things. But I would like to make three observations from the information that Luke actually gives us.

First, The Experience of Pentecost was Unique

Whatever it was in the specifics, it was absolutely unique to that time and that place! I say that because phenomenon of “tongues” has been controversial and divisive in the church. Over here you have the Pentecostals (some of whom are single and trying to meet people) and over there are the charismatics and over there the pentemantics (or however they differentiate themselves), and often they seem to be saying, “We’re the ones who are really biblical.” “We do the biblical thing.” They call themselves things like “full gospel” (what does that make the rest of us?). I took a phone call from one some time ago. This person asked, “Do ya’ll have the Holy Spirit?” I wanted to answer, “Did you lose Him?”

It’s not the end of the argument, but let it be known that no one is duplicating the Acts 2 Pentecostal experience! For one thing, there was this noise like a violent, rushing wind, filling the house. Jesus Himself compared the Holy Spirit to the wind. He said to Nicodemus, “*The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit*” (John 3:8). He may have been thinking about Ezekiel 37, where God causes the wind to blow over the valley of dry bones and they come to life. Or Jesus may have been thinking about Genesis 2:7, “*Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.*” – a one-time event that gave mankind life! Here in Acts 2 God is breathing His life into the Church, a one-time, unique event!

Secondly, there is a visual phenomenon here – something like flames of fire coming to rest on the speakers! I have been in churches where they consider themselves the true children of Pentecost. I heard some things for sure – but I’ve never seen the flames coming to rest on the speakers and I’ve never heard a whirlwind in the house either.

Whether it was ecstatic utterance or known languages, it merely set the table for Peter to preach in a known language, which resulted in about 3000 conversions to Christ – and there is no indication whatsoever that these 3000 spoke in ANY language other than their own. The Acts 2 Pentecost experience was unique even on that day! Even on that day, most of the people did not experience it personally!

Luke's outline in Acts is very much like his outline in the gospel that bears his name. In Luke 2 we find the central passage for the Christmas event: the birth of Christ, a unique event in history that marked the beginning of Christ's work in the world. In Acts 2 we find a unique event in history that marked the beginning of Christ's continuing work in the world through His Holy Spirit –empowered CHURCH!

Which takes us to a second observation:

The Empowerment of Pentecost was for Witness

We want to know about these “tongues,” but Luke finds it more important to tell us that this is the empowerment for witness that they have been waiting for! However it happened, the language barrier was crossed! The curse of Babel was undone by the power of the Spirit! The people heard in their own native languages the “mighty deeds of God.” It provided a vast audience, and a great opportunity for Peter to step to the fore – who stands to deliver a powerful and biblical message of salvation in Christ:

We don't have time to read it today, but it was a message that was grounded in the Old Testament Scriptures, and that didn't appeal to the “felt needs” of his audience, but made the real spiritual needs “felt.” He said things like, “*Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know-- this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death*” (Acts 2:22-23). And, “*Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ--this Jesus whom you crucified*” (Acts 2:37). And as a result, “*when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart,*” (Acts 2:37), and about three thousand responded by coming to faith in Christ.

What did Jesus say would be the divine intention in the sending of the Holy Spirit? Did He say, “But you shall have a private prayer language when the Holy Spirit shall come upon you”? Did He say, “But you shall get goose pimples when the Holy Spirit shall come upon you”? No, He said “*but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). And so here we are many years removed, worshipping the God of the Apostles on Pentecost – and in a part of the earth so remote the Apostles didn't even know it existed.

Lord willing, we are sending 15 to Mexico, where they are to witness, in deeds of kindness, and with words of eternal life. Do you think the Holy Spirit has anything to do with the success of this venture? Pray for us, from your upper room. Ask the Holy Spirit to go ahead of us and convict of sin and righteousness and judgment. Ask the Holy Spirit to give utterance to our lips, that we might present the gospel well, and in an appropriate way to every person who is open to Christ. Ask Him to give us boldness, and courage. It's a little easier to be bold when you are away from your normal life-context, but the heart still thumps extra hard when you wade into the spiritual battle that is evangelism.

The Pentecostal Empowerment was for Witness.

Finally, The Effect of Pentecost was Enduring

John the Baptist said that he baptized with water, but that Christ would “baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” The risen Jesus told the Apostles, “*John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now*” (Acts 1:5).

Paul teaches us in 1 Corinthians 12:13 that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is what makes us a part of the body of Christ, *“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”*

So if the baptism of the Holy Spirit is what makes us a part of the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the CHURCH, then the first occurrence of that baptism is the birthday of the CHURCH. And that happened on the day of Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection, and ten days after His ascension into Heaven!

The Holy Spirit was not “invented” at Pentecost (He exists eternally with the Father and the Son), but it was then that He came into a new relationship with the redeemed. Every soul that comes to Christ in faith is regenerated (or born again/anew) of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual life is imparted; created where there was only spiritual death. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and that forever. The Holy Spirit takes up residence in our lives. We are baptized (or placed into) the body of Christ - we are made a part of the body of which Christ is the head. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit & with the Holy Spirit unto the day of redemption. We are made the eternal property of God; safe from the enemy of our souls. We KNOW we are heaven-bound, not because we are so good (for we are not), but because God is so faithful, and the seal of the Holy Spirit so unbreakable.

Father in Heaven, how privileged we are to live in the age of the Holy Spirit! Thank you for the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of every person who knows Christ as Savior. What a privilege to have been made a part of the body of Christ, the CHURCH! Sealed by the Holy Spirit for the day of Redemption – having been infused with Your life – made partakers of the life and Spirit and nature of God! Lord, we want to yield to Him in our lives – in every way, in every aspect – in our relationships at home and in our families, at work or at school, in the world, in our relationship with You, that we may more fully know and experience His power for godly life, ministry, and service. Lord, may Your Holy Spirit do His work in the lives our friends and loved ones who know nothing of any of this in their experience. Convince and convict of sin, and righteousness, and judgment – not to heap up condemnation on them, but to move them toward redemption – free and full in the Savior, Jesus Christ, we pray in His name, amen.