

ALIVE IN THE SPIRIT
A SERIES ON THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES
(2) PENTECOST

Acts 2:1-13

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PROLOGUE

Pentecost is a major Christian holiday. Sadly, it is not often observed as a major holiday. Most of us can remember something about last Christmas. We may even remember last Easter. But few of us can remember anything about the last Pentecost or even when the last Pentecost took place. (By the way, last Pentecost was on June 9 and the next observance of Pentecost will be on May 31, 2020.)

Pentecost is associated with the Holy Spirit. But there is a dearth of knowledge about the Holy Spirit in the church. Many years ago an elderly gentleman came up to me and asked, "Why do we never speak of the Holy Spirit in church?" Knowing Emmet as I did I knew he did not mean that in the absolute sense as if we never said anything about the Holy Spirit. Rather, here was a man who had been active in the life of that congregation for many years, who had a deep and abiding faith in God and yet he sensed there was something more and that "something more" had to do with the Holy Spirit.

I do not believe that Emmet is alone in this. For many Christians, the Holy Spirit remains a great mystery and they long to know more. On Pentecost, nearly 2,000 years ago, the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus. This is recorded for us in the book known as the Acts of the Apostles. The opening verses of chapter two are a kind of summary of much of the work of the Holy Spirit. The idea here is that the more we understand about the Holy Spirit the greater our appreciation for what the Holy Spirit can do in our lives.

SCRIPTURE

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we

hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine” (Acts 2:1-13 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Pastors from every type of church struggle to help people understand the person and work of the Holy Spirit. A little boy stopped in front of a church with his bike and he saw the priest come out. The priest said, "Come inside, I want to show you something." The little boy replied, "But somebody will take my bike." The priest assured him, "Don't worry, the Holy Spirit will watch it." So the little boy went inside and the priest said, "Let me show you how to do the sign of the cross. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen. Now you try it." So the boy said, "In the name of the Father and the Son, Amen." The priest asked, "What happened to the Holy Spirit?" The boy replied, "He's outside, watching my bike!"

Let us take a closer look at Pentecost to uncover at least four lessons about the Holy Spirit.

1. ANTICIPATED EVENT

According to Acts chapter two the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was an anticipated event.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place (Acts 2:1).

Pentecost was an anticipated event. This was true in at least two senses. The word Pentecost means “fiftieth day” and it was called that because it took place fifty days after another festival known as Passover. The Christian observance of Pentecost takes place fifty days after Easter (counting Easter and Pentecost).

Pentecost was originally an Old Testament festival that celebrated God’s gracious provision during the spring harvest. Later in history it also became a celebration of the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses. As our story in Acts opens we see that a great many people from near and far had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost.

But there was another reason why this particular Pentecost was an anticipated event. It was the fulfillment of the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Moses said that he

hoped there would be a day when the Spirit would come upon all of God's people (Numbers 11:29). Other prophets said the same including a man named Joel, "And afterward,' God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit on all people'" (Joel 2:28). This promise was reiterated by Jesus who said to his followers, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). This promise came true on the Pentecost immediately following Jesus' resurrection.

2. PROFOUND POWER

The coming of the Holy Spirit is a profound power.

And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting (Acts 2:2).

Approximately one hundred and twenty of the followers of Jesus had gathered in Jerusalem to observe Pentecost. It is important to note that the promised Holy Spirit came upon them in a decisive and dramatic way.

Some time ago I told a number of you about my experience with Halley's Comet. When I was a kid I was fascinated by space exploration. One of the things that caught my attention was Halley's Comet.¹ I learned that it returned to pass by Earth every seventy-six years. I was excited to realize that at some point during my lifetime I would have the opportunity to see Halley's Comet. The opportunity came during the winter of 1985-86. We were living in Iowa at the time on the edge of town near a large flat field – ideal geography to watch the night sky. But I quickly discovered a problem that comes with looking at the stars with binoculars on a cold night – shivering makes every star look like a comet! I looked, and I looked and I looked but to this day I do not know whether I saw Halley's Comet or not. The big event was a bust.

Imagine if the coming of the Holy Spirit had been like that. There would be so much uncertainty and doubt. Christians would be arguing for centuries over whether or not the Holy Spirit ever came. Fortunately, this was not the case.

The disciples heard the sound of a wind storm but there was no breeze, fire was

¹ The most standard pronunciation of "Halley" - and the pronunciation that the astronomer himself probably used - rhymes with "valley". The once-standard alternate pronunciation that rhymes with "Bailey" led to rock and roll singer and Michigander (b. Highland Park, Michigan , July 6, 1925) Bill Haley naming his band Bill Haley and the Comets.

everywhere but nothing was burned, and these uneducated Galileans spoke the languages of the Mediterranean with eloquence and conviction. We may not completely understand all the circumstances that took place that day but one thing is clear: the Holy Spirit had indeed come upon the followers of Jesus. And now the Christian community is anointed by the Spirit (1 John 2:20); and the Spirit assures each believer of the indwelling presence of Jesus (1 John 3:24).

3. PERSONAL WORK

The work of the Spirit is a personal work.

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them (Acts 2:3).

Fire as a symbol of the presence of God would have been well known among the first followers of Jesus. The burning bush seen by Moses (Ex 3:2-5), the pillar of fire that guided Israel by night through the wilderness (Ex 13:21), the consuming fire on Mount Sinai (Ex 24:17), and the fire that hovered over the wilderness tabernacle (Ex 40:38) are just a few examples. Also, John the Baptist explicitly linked the coming of the Holy Spirit with fire. The "tongues of fire" (*glossai hosei pyros*) here are not to be equated with the "other tongues" (*heterais glossais* – translated as "other languages" by NRSV) of verse four but should be taken as visible representations of the Spirit of God.

Fire represents the Spirit and, in turn, fire is represented by the liturgical color of red. As such, many people try to wear red to celebrate Pentecost. Sometimes Pentecost falls on Memorial Day Weekend (it does not this year) and people think that red is worn in church for that reason but that is only a coincidence. Still others, like the youngster whose family typically had hamburgers and hot dogs on the grill on this holiday, associate red with their favorite condiment. This reminds me of the story of three tomatoes who were in a hurry to get to church: a mommy tomato, a daddy tomato and their son. The son lagged behind and in a careless moment fell splat on the floor. His dad yelled to him, "Ketchup, son."

Now the fact that the fire represented the Spirit was not unusual. What was unusual was that this fire came to rest on each one of them individually. Under the old covenant the Spirit rested only on certain leaders for special and often temporary purposes. Under the new covenant, as established by Jesus and inaugurated at Pentecost, the Spirit now rests upon each believer individually. In other words, it is through the Holy Spirit that each of us can have a personal relationship with God. As it says in Scripture, "For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love" (Rom 5:5 NLT).

The Holy Spirit is a person not a thing. The Holy Spirit is not even a force. You cannot have a personal relationship with a force, for example, the force of gravity. Now some of you may think you are on intimate terms with gravity because you have a tendency to drop things or you fall down a lot but that is not the same thing. The Holy Spirit is a person. Jesus addressed him as a person. The Holy Spirit is also divine. When we speak of the Spirit we are speaking of God. And so we say that the Holy Spirit is God making Jesus real to us, showing us who Jesus really is and enabling us to have a personal relationship with him that will last forever. The difference between knowing that Jesus is the Savior of the world and knowing he is your Savior is the personal work of the Holy Spirit.

4. EMPOWERED MINISTRY

The enabling of the Spirit results in an empowered ministry.

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability (2:4).

Prior to this, Jesus had emphasized that the coming of the Holy Spirit would mean that the followers of Jesus would have the power to continue the work of spreading his message. He told them that they would be his witnesses, starting in Jerusalem, and eventually reaching across the world. He said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8 CEB). Here is the command to witness. It comes as a direct commission from Jesus himself. This commission lays an obligation on all Christians and comes to us as a gift with a promise. It is a privilege to tell others about Jesus and we are promised the aid and power of the Holy Spirit.

A young man told about some friends of his who had a five year old daughter named Lindsey. One day Lindsey was sitting on her front porch when one of her friends came by after having had a bit of an argument with her mother. Trying to comfort her, Lindsey told her about Jesus – How if she believed in Jesus, prayed to receive him, she would be forgiven all her sins and would go to heaven. The little girl was convinced and she prayed to receive Jesus. When she was done she looked up at Lindsey and asked, "Will my mommy be in heaven, too?" Lindsey thought a moment and said, "If she believes. But if you don't want her there, don't tell her about Jesus!"

When this story concerns young children it is amusing. When it concerns adults it is tragic. The Holy Spirit rests upon each of us to enable us to witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ. It does not mean that every Christian is an evangelist nor does it mean that our witness must always be verbal. St. Frances of Assisi said, "Preach the Gospel all the time – If necessary, use words." But whether in words or actions, in a large group or one-

on-one with a friend, we are to help people know who Jesus is and what he has done for us. We are to be his witnesses.

CONCLUSION

There are numerous lessons to be drawn from Pentecost, including these four:

- The outpouring of the Spirit was an anticipated event based on the prophecies of the Old Testament and the words of Jesus. The implication being, that the more we appreciate and cooperate with the Holy Spirit the greater our ability to understand and apply God's Word to our lives.
- The coming of the Spirit is a profound work and so the more we appreciate and cooperate with the Holy Spirit the greater our assurance of faith.
- The work of the Spirit is a personal work and so the more we appreciate and cooperate with the Holy Spirit the greater our intimacy with the Lord .
- The enabling of the Spirit results in an empowered ministry and so the more we appreciate and cooperate with the Holy Spirit the greater our ability to communicate the Good News of Jesus Christ to a lost and hurting world.

Charleton Heston, who starred in the epic film *Ben Hur*, tells the story of a conversation he had with the director during the filming of the famous chariot race. Heston was anxious about controlling the horses. He reportedly said, "I can barely stay on this thing. I can't win the race." The director said, "Your job is to hang on. It is my job to see that you win."

In a way, this describes our relationship with the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit's job to see that we accomplish what we could not accomplish on our own. Our job is to hang on!