

Pentecost 2015

What's It All About?

Today is Pentecost Sunday and around the world the church celebrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as described for us in Acts 2. We read this passage earlier today, but let's take a closer look. **“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.**

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” Acts 2:1-4

Jews from everywhere had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost and as they heard the commotion they gathered asking, “What does this mean?” (V12). That's the question we want to ask and answer today. “What does this mean? For the Jews of the Old Testament, for the disciples of the New Testament and for us, what was and what is the day of Pentecost all about?”

Pentecost was one of the ancient Hebrew festivals celebrating the completion of the grain harvest. You can read about it in Exodus 34:22, Leviticus 23:15 and Deuteronomy 26. It is described in different ways but often as the **Feast of Weeks** because it was to be held seven weeks after Passover. It began to be called *Shavuot* which is the Hebrew word for weeks, and eventually it was called **Pentecost**, because it was literally fifty days after Passover and the Greek word for fiftieth is *Pentakostos*. You can google Pentecost to know more.

The feast of weeks was to be a set time of giving thanks to God for the harvest. The Lord told them when they had settled in the land he was giving them, they were to take the firstfruits of all they produced and present it to the Lord as an offering. It was a way of acknowledging God's faithful provision for them. It was a celebration of God having kept his promise to give them a land that flowed with milk and honey.

Deuteronomy 26 instructs the people that when they brought their firstfruit offering they were to hand the basket to the priest who would set it down in front of the altar, then they were to recall their history, that God delivered them out of bondage in Egypt and brought them to this promised land. They reaffirmed their obedience to the Lord, saying **“I have obeyed the Lord my God; I have done everything you commanded me.” Deuteronomy 26:14.**

It was at the same time according to the rabbis, seven weeks after Passover, that God gave the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. This is what is celebrated today in Israel and in

synagogues around the world. It is not only the giving of the Law by God to Israel, but it marks the receiving of the Law by Israel, i.e. the people accepted the Law of God, the covenant of God and by doing so they were agreeing to obey the Lord and do everything he commanded. They received the law and by doing so they were saying, “Amen, sign me up.”

By the time of the disciples in Acts 2, the people were celebrating the grain harvest and celebrating the giving and receiving of the law. They were remembering the law written on the stone tablets and given to Moses, but God had promised a day would come when instead of writing the law on stone tablets he would write the law on their hearts. He promised to breathe upon them, to put his Spirit within them. That day, in part, had come.

Seven weeks, fifty days after the Passover in Egypt the Israelites were given the law, the instruction and guiding force for their lives. Fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection, on the day of Pentecost, the believers were given the Holy Spirit, the instructing and guiding force for their lives. Now Pentecost marked not only the giving of the law but the giving of the Holy Spirit. There was fire and wind on Mt. Sinai and there was fire and wind in the giving of the Holy Spirit. There are so many parallels between Shavuot and the day of Pentecost that we could spend a long time looking at this, but back to our original question: what does Pentecost mean for them and for us? What is it all about?

Consider this: **Pentecost can be seen as the final act of the saving ministry of Jesus.** Think about it. Jesus told his disciples he would die upon the cross, but after three days he would rise again. He told them he would go to his father but not to be troubled because he wouldn’t leave them alone but would send the Holy Spirit to be with them and to live within them. That’s why he repeatedly told them to remain in Jerusalem until they received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. There was one more thing to be done. One more thing they needed. In this sense Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, is the completion of and the final act of his saving ministry. The next thing will be his return when he comes to get us, but **At Pentecost Jesus sends the Holy Spirit in order to produce in us everything he won for us through his death and resurrection!**

How important is Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit? It is essential. I know through the years we have made the focus of Pentecost the experience of speaking in other tongues, but while speaking in tongues was the immediate physical consequence of Spirit baptism, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is about so much more. John Stott wrote, “**Without**

the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship would be inconceivable, even impossible. There can be no life without the Life-giver, no understanding without the Spirit of truth, no fellowship without the unity of the Spirit, no Christlikeness of character apart from His fruit, and no effective witness without His power. As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead.” ...John Stott How we need the life giving presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost can be viewed as the inauguration of the age of the Spirit. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit’s role became central to the life of the church. The Holy Spirit is seen leading, guiding and directing the growth of the church. Decisions were made by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Miracles occurred by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. If you read the book of Acts you will continually see the Holy Spirit mentioned as working in and through the church.

There is an subtle example of the change that occurs with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 1. Peter tells the other disciples they need to choose a new disciple since Judas had killed himself. They “cast lots” to see who would become the twelfth disciple. That was the last time “casting lots” is mentioned in the bible. The next time a decision needs to be made we read, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” The Holy Spirit gave personal direction, wisdom and power to the disciples and the church.

Notice too with the age of the Spirit, the focus changes. Now the anointing of God is not just upon one person like Moses or upon Jesus or even just the 12 or the 120. Instead, the anointing of the Holy Spirit is for everyone who believes upon and calls upon his name. Peter said **“This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will prophesy.’” Acts 2:16-18**

The focus had shifted from one nation, Israel, to the nations of the earth. The focus was no longer on just the Jewish people but upon all the people of the earth. Whosoever will may come, the bible says. The invitation is open to all to call upon the name of the Lord. When the people asked Peter in response to his sermon what they should do, he said, **“Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.” Acts 2:38-39.**

With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit comes a whole new understanding of God's plan and purpose and calling. Soon the gentiles will begin to hear the message of the gospel and call upon the Lord. Peter will find himself preaching to a Roman soldier's household in Ceaserea and what he proclaimed on the day of Pentecost to the Jews in Jerusalem will become true for people from every tribe and nation.

Pentecost can be seen as the first great revival in that an entire community was made aware of the Spirit and power of God. Acts 2:6 says, "When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language." I'm not sure what the sound was they heard. Was it the rushing mighty wind? Was there a sign of fire outside before it entered the house and separated and appeared to sit upon the heads of the disciples? Was it the sound of 120 people speaking in languages they had not learned? Whatever it was a crowd began to gather and the convicting power of the Holy Spirit fell upon the crowd as Peter preached Christ crucified, risen and ascended to the right hand of God. 3,000 were saved and baptized and added to the church that day. However else we understand Pentecost, ultimately,

Pentecost is the equipping of the church with power for ministry. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" Jesus said. Pentecost was and still is about power. Equipping the church with power! What the disciples needed in order to proclaim the gospel first in Jerusalem, and then in Judea and in Samaria and then to the ends of the earth was the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the ultimate resource for ministry. We are talking about the miraculous power of the Spirit of God. The Greek word used is *dunamis*. It is explosive force and power. It is power to change things, power to do the miraculous and power to be witnesses. It is the ability to know what to do and then the power needed to do it.

What is Pentecost all about? Let me explain it this way. Fifty three days before the day of Pentecost, Peter was standing near the fire in the courtyard of the high priest Caiaphas as Jesus was being interrogated and tried. When a servant girl pointed Peter out and said, "This man is one of the followers of Jesus," Peter denied it. Once, twice, finally swearing an oath on his third denial that he did not know Jesus. Now, after seven weeks have gone by, just fifty three days later, after being with the risen Lord and now being baptized in the Holy Spirit, Peter stands up in front of thousands in the marketplace or perhaps in the temple courtyard itself and begins to preach. "This same Jesus, whom you crucified, God raised him from the dead and has made him

both Lord and Messiah.” What in the world made that kind of dramatic change in fifty-three days? The baptism in the Holy Spirit. The promise of the father: “You shall receive power and you shall be my witnesses” and that’s just what happened. Power and boldness and anointing and spiritual life and direction - that’s what Pentecost was all about.

The next thing you know, Peter is saying to a man who was crippled from birth and had never walked, “Silver and gold have I none, but in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” and the man stands to his feet and begins to walk and jump and praise God. And then more miraculous signs happen and more sick are healed and those tormented by evil spirits are set free. Peter and the others are threatened and beaten. In Acts 5 they are arrested and put in jail but an angel breaks them out during the night and tells them, **“Go stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life.” Acts 5:20**

That’s what Pentecost is about: the full message of a brand new life. **Pentecost is about a new life in Christ, lived in the fullness and power of the Holy Spirit.** And that brings us to the present time and our need today. How we need a fresh Pentecost. How we need a new empowerment of the church. I fear that sometimes we’ve tried to substitute excellence for anointing. We need and should always pursue excellence in all we do, but it is no substitute for anointing. I fear we may try to substitute the conviction of the Holy Spirit with entertaining tips for living a happier, healthier life. Pentecost brings fire with it, and sound and fury perhaps. Pentecost brought a fire that judged and burned, ask Ananias and Sapphira.

Think for a moment about the symbols of Pentecost that Luke mentions. The sound of a rushing mighty wind, tongues of fire, supernaturally speaking in other languages. We need the wind of the Holy Spirit to breathe life into us and into the church. A body without breath is a corpse John Stott said and a church without the Spirit is dead. Lord, send the wind of your Holy Spirit and breathe life upon us again.

Think about the tongues of fire that sat upon them. Fire is a symbol of the cleansing, purifying aspect of the Holy Spirit. Fire also warms and brings light. I think it was Dr. David DuPlessis who said we have kept the glorious truth of God’s grace and power in the deep freeze. He said if you offer a frozen steak to a hungry person it is of no use to them but if you put it on the grill – if you put the fire to it - you can’t keep him away. The fire on that steak brings an aroma, a sound, a smell that can draw a crowd and a response. In the same way the fire of Pentecost produces an aroma that draws people. It feeds and satisfies those who are hungry for

something real! Lord, send the fire of your Holy Spirit to our lives. Sanctify and purify us and let our lives sizzle and provide an aroma that draws hungry, needy people to Christ.

Acts 2 tells us the tongues of fire separated and came to rest on each of them and that all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. It is interesting to me that the tongues of fire came to rest upon the people individually. It was an individual, personal infilling of the Holy Spirit. The baptism in the Holy Spirit produces a deeper, personal, private intimacy and experience with God, and yet it is also the work of the Holy Spirit that unites us as one and makes us collectively the one, holy, universal, church – the body of Christ! Pentecost was like the tower of Babel in reverse. At Babel the people began to speak different languages and couldn't understand one another because they were all speaking something different. At Pentecost, they were speaking different languages but they were all declaring the same thing: the wonders of God. They were united with a common purpose, to glorify God and to testify of Jesus and tell the whole world what God had done through Jesus Christ the Messiah and Savior and Lord.

We need a new Pentecost. We need an experience that empowers and produces a new intimacy with God. We need a new Pentecost that will open our eyes to the harvest around us. We need a new Pentecost that will produce in us a new life, lived in the fullness and power of the Holy Spirit. O God, may we experience a fresh Pentecost today!