

## *The Power of Pentecost*

### **Acts 2:1-13**

John Breon

The day finally came. The waiting was done. Now, what God had promised arrived. The power Jesus had promised his disciples was now filling them and flowing through them. And they began to announce God's deeds of power. This happened on the day of Pentecost after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension.

Pentecost means "fiftieth day." It was a harvest festival that followed Passover and involved covenant renewal. Another name for Pentecost was the Feast of Weeks. For us, it comes fifty days after Easter and has close ties to Easter. The events of Jesus' Resurrection, Ascension, and Giving the Holy Spirit all flow together and depend on each other. The power God gives to his people at Pentecost is the power God demonstrated in Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Pentecost is empty if it's not connected with what's gone before. At the same time, without the present power and work of the Holy Spirit, the cross and resurrection remain distant and removed from us. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are not just ancient history but present reality through the Holy Spirit.

They were all together in one place on the day of Pentecost. This group is probably the 120 followers of Jesus mentioned in 1:15, though there may have been others. They've been waiting in Jerusalem, obeying Jesus' command to them just before he went into heaven. He had told them to wait for what God the Father had promised. So they've been waiting and praying. Their waiting has been active, expectant, powerful—the kind of waiting that makes possible what we're waiting for.

Now, *suddenly from heaven* come sounds and sights and experiences. The source of the Pentecost experience and power is beyond the disciples. It comes from heaven, that is, it comes from God.

They first heard a sound like a violent wind in the house where they were sitting. We know about violent wind in Oklahoma, don't we? The movie *Twister* came out twenty years ago. At the time, it seemed very unrealistic. Then three years later, a cluster of powerful tornadoes similar to

those in the movie tore through the state. A recent article tells about the influence of that movie on people all over the country. A lot of people wanted to become storm chasers or meteorologists after seeing *Twister*. In a few years after the movie's release, enrollment at OU's meteorology program went from 225 to 450. Even though it wasn't totally realistic, *Twister* showed the power of storms and it led to a lot of opportunities for education (<http://newsok.com/article/5499438>, accessed 5/26/16).

I wonder if what the disciples heard sounded like a tornado. Notice it doesn't say it was an actual wind, but a sound like wind. Luke uses common language to try to describe an uncommon, supernatural event. But a sound like wind reminds us of scriptures that use wind to represent God's presence. The Hebrews had seen wind as a symbol of God's Spirit for a long time. The same Hebrew word is used for wind, breath, and spirit. That's also true in Greek.

Genesis 1:2, describing the beginning of creation, says that a wind from God, or the Spirit of God, swept over the face of the waters. In Genesis 2:7 God forms Adam from the dust of the ground and breathes into him the breath of life; and Adam becomes a living being.

Ezekiel was a prophet who spoke quite a lot about the Spirit. In chapter 37, he tells about a vision of a valley full of dry bones. The LORD asks him, "Can these bones live?" And Ezekiel says, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know." Then God directs Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. As he does, they begin to come together. The bones get attached, then tendons and flesh cover them. Now the valley is full of corpses. The LORD tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the *breath*, calling it to come from the four *winds* and enter those who have been slain. "I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life, and stood up on their feet—a vast army" (v. 10).

The point of this vision was God's message to the Jews in exile that God would raise them from the death of exile, give them life, and restore them to their land. God promises to put his *Spirit* in them so they will live.

The vision of Israel as dead dry bones is a picture of the people of God at various times. Sometimes it's a picture of the church. Christians can sometimes seem lifeless. I heard once about a church where a man died

during the worship service. The ushers called 911, the ambulance came, and the paramedics carried out half the congregation before they found the right man.

God wants to breathe his life-giving Spirit into his church. In John 3:8, Jesus compares the Spirit's work to the blowing wind: You hear its sound but you don't know where it comes from or where it's going—it blows wherever it will.

The wind of God's Spirit blew into that group of Jesus' followers and made them come alive in every aspect of their lives—spirit, mind, emotion, will. The Spirit is blowing today, moving and working among us. God's Spirit will make us alive.

We can't catch the wind, but we can be caught. We can hoist our sails and allow the wind to propel us, to take us where God wants us to go. Nancy and I have a print of a painting that shows a scene on a river. One person is rowing a boat and another is sailing (see it at <http://uploads6.wikiart.org/images/georges-seurat/the-river-seine-at-la-grande-jatte-1888.jpg>, accessed 5/27/16). That speaks to me of life in the Spirit. We often think it's our effort, our rowing, that gets us where God wants us. But God's more interested in our letting him fill our sails and carry us along. I don't know much about sailing, but I realize you don't just sit and do nothing. You're active. But it's not your strength that moves the boat. You rely on a power beyond yourself. That's something like being filled with God's Spirit. All the spiritual disciplines and practices and habits we talk about are ways we hoist our sails and steer with the movement of God's Spirit.

Here's another illustration of the Holy Spirit acting like wind. Wind blows from high pressure to low pressure, the point of least resistance. The Holy Spirit moves to low pressure as well. We give God low pressure in our lives when we trust Jesus. Faith in Jesus Christ creates low pressure in us and the Holy Spirit rushes to that low pressure—filling us and bringing God's presence, power, and love into the center of our lives.

Some years ago, a farmer in Kansas invented a machine called the "Windhexe." It forces compressed air into a funnel shaped container and creates something like a tornado in a can. It's used to pulverize and

dehydrate waste material (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windhexe>, accessed 5/26/16). Concentrated wind power that can help create something new. That's something like the Holy Spirit's power in the church.

Fire is another symbol of God's presence and of the Holy Spirit. Abram had a vision of God making a covenant with him. The LORD's presence was represented by "a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch" (Gen 15:17). Remember the burning bush that Moses saw (Ex 3:2) as well as the fire and smoke on Mt. Sinai when God made covenant with the people of Israel (Ex 19:18). God led the Israelites through the wilderness, appearing to them in a pillar of fire and cloud (Ex 13:21). Occasionally, fire came out of God's presence to consume sacrifices (Lev 9:24; 1 Kgs 18:38). The LORD at his coming would be like a refiner's fire (Mal 3:2).

John the Baptist announced Jesus as the One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Lk 3:16). Jesus himself promised the disciples that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5)—that is, immersed in the presence of God.

They weren't ready for this baptism until after Jesus died and rose again. Jesus, who was without sin, could receive the Spirit baptism. He was *the* Bearer of the Spirit throughout his ministry. But the baptism of the Spirit for his followers would have been destructive because sin still reigned in their hearts. The baptism of fire would have consumed them. But, by his death, Jesus provided a sacrifice for sin and broke the bondage of sin. In the New Covenant, Jesus can now offer Spirit baptism to those who by faith receive his forgiveness and cleansing.

I've read that there's a need for natural forest fires to burn away undergrowth and debris, to open up clogged places. Some trees need fire to melt the wax that hold their cones closed, so the seeds can drop to the ground.

Forgiven and put right with God through Jesus, we can receive the fire of God's Spirit, not as consuming but as purifying. The Spirit comes to burn away chaff, to refine like metal is purified through fire. The Spirit produces purity in God's people. We call the Holy Spirit the *Holy* Spirit because the Spirit is holy and makes us holy.

Looking at the early church in Acts, we can see several expressions of the Holy Spirit's presence and work. The Spirit's fire gives us the light of belief—assurance and confidence in Jesus, in the gospel, in his resurrection. The Spirit's fire produces the warmth of fellowship, setting our hearts ablaze with God's love and uniting us with each other. The Spirit's fire generates power for service—sort of like a combustion engine. We're aflame with love and compassion for people and we're given power to work toward meeting their needs.

The disciples heard and saw signs of the Holy Spirit. Then they were filled with the Spirit. The very Spirit of God entered into them and put the life of Christ in them. They were now people in Christ and people in whom and through whom Christ would live.

This gift of the Holy Spirit, given in a unique way that Pentecost, is still available. We can experience Pentecost for ourselves. Our church can experience Pentecost. Pentecost for us is the experience of God's Holy Spirit coming upon us in power and filling us with God's life.

We receive the Spirit and this power and life when we put our faith in Jesus and receive him as our Savior and Lord. By receiving the Spirit, we're incorporated into the body of Christ. Then we're to continue being full of the Spirit.

These disciples who were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost immediately began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them. Throughout Luke and Acts, inspired speech is a result of the Holy Spirit's coming upon people. Sometimes they speak in languages they haven't learned and sometimes they speak their own language. But they always tell about something God is doing or will do. At Pentecost they spoke in tongues or languages that people from all over the known world understood. This was a miracle of proclamation, of declaring the wonders of God, God's deeds of power, in a way that all kinds of people could understand.

Two more times in Acts, the Holy Spirit comes upon groups of people and enables them to speak in languages they haven't learned (10:44-46; 19:6). At other times, people receive the Holy Spirit without the sign of speaking in another language. In 1 Corinthians 12-14, the apostle Paul gives

guidance on many spiritual gifts, including speaking in other languages and interpreting what is said. This seems to be different from what's going on in Acts 2. In Acts, the gift of languages is for proclamation to various peoples and is sometimes a sign of the Holy Spirit's activity. In 1 Corinthians, the gift of speaking in another language is for building up the church or individual believers. An inspired message in an unknown language that is then interpreted, explained in a known language, is like prophecy—a word from God for the gathered community of faith. Paul also indicates that the Holy Spirit sometimes enables a person to pray in a personal, devotional way in a language they haven't learned.

A lot of people have experienced and practice these gifts of speaking. The Pentecostal and Charismatic movements that started in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century have made this experience widespread. Those movements are where the church worldwide is seeing some of its most significant growth. Some of us disagree with our Pentecostal friends when they say that speaking in tongues is *the* initial physical evidence of being baptized in the Holy Spirit and that everybody should experience it. Sometimes speaking in tongues is a sign of receiving the Spirit, but sometimes it's not. Some people are helped by praying in tongues and some people don't need that gift. We can't require more of people than God requires. At the same time, we want to be open to all the gifts and experiences God has for us. We can trust our loving God to be active in our lives in ways that are best.

What's most important about the speaking at Pentecost is that God is making the good news available to everyone everywhere. Jesus' followers are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin to speak about God's powerful deeds. They tell about the dramatic and extraordinary things God had done in and through Jesus. We need the Holy Spirit's power to be effective in telling the good news and sharing our faith.

Many people in Jerusalem that day were amazed and filled with wonder. Others scoffed and sneered, accusing the disciples of being drunk. There's always opposition to the gospel. I like what N. T. Wright says about this reaction to the disciples' experience:

Again and again in the work of the church, to this day, there are always plenty who declare that we are wasting our time and talking incomprehensible nonsense. Equally, some Christians have been so concerned to keep up safe appearances and to make sure they are looking like ordinary, normal people that they would never, under any circumstances, have been accused of being drunk, at 9:00 in the morning or any other time. Part of the challenge of this passage is the question: have our churches today got enough energy, enough spirit-driven new life, to make onlookers pass any comment at all? Has anything happened which might make people think we were drunk? If not, is it because the spirit is simply at work in other ways, or because we have so successfully quenched the spirit that there is actually nothing happening at all? (*Acts for Everyone*)

Are we willing to receive the power God has for the church? Will we let the Holy Spirit cleanse us and recreate us, purge us and empower us, fill us and enable us to tell about God's deeds of power in Jesus Christ our Lord?