



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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Power Source
Acts 2:1-21

Today is Pentecost Sunday! In the Christian Year, Pentecost falls seven weeks after Easter (fifty days by Jewish reckoning), bringing the season of Eastertide to a close. In Eastertide, the focus is on the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Pentecost focuses on how God poured out his Holy Spirit on the church. We Baptists have never given Pentecost much attention until recent decades, but it's really the third greatest day on the Christian calendar, alongside Christmas and Easter. Listen to the story of that first Pentecost after Jesus' death and resurrection from Acts 2:1-21 . . . *Read text* . . .

The Jewish Pentecost

Traditionally, Pentecost was known to the Jews as the "Festival of Weeks." The Old Testament Law prescribed three major Jewish festivals that were to be held each year (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles).

Since Pentecost fell in late spring when travel was easiest, it was the best attended of the three. It was a joyous celebration of the barley wheat harvest as a gift from God. Seven weeks earlier during the Festival of Unleavened Bread, which began with Passover, a priest would have stood before the altar in the temple's Holy Place waving a fistful of barley wheat before God as an offering. This sheaf represented the firstfruits of the harvest, and was offered to God *before* the harvest began. Fifty days later, after time for the harvest, came the Festival of Weeks—"Pentecost" (from the Greek for "fifty")—a time to praise God for his gracious provision.

These festivals were always joyous because they celebrated God's mighty acts on behalf of his people. Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles, the Festival of Lights (Hanukkah)—all these were times of deep yearnings and stirred expectations about the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, God's Anointed One, who would be the Son of David. Many Jews thought he would break the yoke of Roman rule and restore Israel to the former glories of David's kingdom. So they were yearning for his coming!

This particular year, there had been some strange events leading up to Pentecost, all surrounding the young man known as Jesus of Nazareth. Many had thought he might be the Messiah they were expecting, but this notion had died on a Roman cross along with him. The Romans had crucified him at the request—or the demand—of the Jewish religious and political leaders at the Passover.

All hope was gone about him, except for among a small band of his followers, who now insisted that God had raised him from the dead. They said that he had risen on the third day after his death, just as he had said he would. They declared they had seen him over and over during the weeks after his crucifixion, that they'd seen the wounds in his hands and side, and that at his invitation they had touched him and felt that he was indeed flesh and bone. They said he had

even eaten with them, all of which would disprove the notion that they were simply seeing his ghost or his guardian angel. After all, spirits didn't have flesh and bones, and neither ghosts nor angels ate food. They were insistent that it was actually Jesus, risen from the dead! And now, according to them, their leaders had seen him ascend to heaven in the clouds, with the promise that he'd return one day in power and glory. That had been ten days ago.

Of course, everyone had written them off. No doubt these 120 souls were simply so tormented by their grief and shock over the execution of the one in whom they had put so much stock that they were hallucinating. Yes, everyone had written them off—until now, that is!

That Day of Pentecost

What happened that day—that first Pentecost after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection—could only be attributed to another of God's mighty acts!

Jesus' followers were all gathered together in one place, perhaps in that large upper room where he had shared his last supper with his disciples. They'd been staying there since his crucifixion. For ten days since Jesus had ascended to the Father in heaven, they had been devoting themselves ***with one accord*** to prayer (1:14, KJV, ESV),¹ waiting for the Father to fulfill his promise.

What was that promise? Jesus had given it to them in Acts 1:5—***“for John baptized with water, but in a few days, you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”***

Now the time for fulfillment had come! As they were gathered together, all of a sudden something ***like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house***. Then they saw something incredible—it looked like ***tongues of fire*** that divided and distributed and rested on each of them. When this happened, they were all ***filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit enabled them*** (2:2-4)!

Now understand that there were Jews and Jewish converts from virtually every nation there in Jerusalem for the festival. Through exile and sometimes by choice, Jews had scattered worldwide and settled in many different lands. But many would come to Jerusalem at least once in their lives for one of the festivals. Those who took the time and bore the expense to travel to Jerusalem for a festival of course tended to be very devout. That day there were Jews and Jewish converts in Jerusalem from Parthia, Media, Elam, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Crete, and Arabia.

When they heard the strange sound, they came together to see what was going on. It was astounding, even bewildering! Every one of them was hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed in their mother tongue!

Now most of them probably knew Greek. It was the commercial and international language of the day. And many of them probably knew at least some Aramaic or maybe even a little Hebrew from synagogue school. And they knew that these men who were speaking were for the most part uneducated Galileans, who would have known Aramaic as their native tongue and some Greek for commercial purposes.

But they were hearing the gospel of God's mighty acts proclaimed ***in their own native languages and dialects!***

Needless to say, they were all amazed and perplexed, wondering what all this meant. But of course there were those nay-sayers and detractors, who mocked and said, ***They have had too much wine*** (2:13).

At this, Peter got up. Yes, Simon Peter. The Simon whom Jesus had named “Rock” (*Petros* in Greek). The Peter who was always sticking his foot in his mouth, speaking before he really

thought, feeling like he had to say *something*, even when he had no idea what to say. The Peter who denied Jesus the night before his death—not once, not even twice, but three times.

This Peter stood up and said in 2:15-21,

“These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, 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.
I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.
The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and
glorious day of the Lord.
And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.”**

Peter went on to preach a powerful gospel message, reminding them of the events of Christ’s life and death, declaring the reality of his resurrection and lordship, and calling the people to repent and put their faith in Jesus. That very day, *three thousand* of them did! They were all baptized and added to the church.

It’s amazing, isn’t it? Here was Peter who just a few weeks earlier cowered before a servant girl who thought she recognized him as one of Jesus’ disciples. Three times he denied Jesus to save his own skin.

But now, out in the open, he was boldly preaching Jesus to thousands upon thousands of Jews from all over the world! What was it that made the difference?

Had Peter somehow suddenly developed some kind of inner strength from within his own moral resources?

Had he experienced some kind of mental, emotional, and spiritual growth spurt that suddenly made him a mature and articulate leader?

Or did it have something to do with what happened that first Pentecost after Jesus’ death and resurrection, when God poured out his Spirit on the church?

Wasn’t it that the Holy Spirit empowered and enabled Peter and the others to stand and boldly and effectively proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to an audience where not everyone was receptive to the message?

The source of our power

That really is what this story is about, isn’t it? *The Holy Spirit is the church’s source of*

power for mission and ministry! God poured out his Spirit on the church in a new and unique way that day.

But did it stop then? While on the one hand, as my seminary New Testament professor Dr. Malcolm Tolbert described it, “Pentecost was one of those unrepeatable acts in salvation history,” on the other hand, doesn’t God *continue* to give *fresh outpourings* of his Spirit to enable and empower his church for what he calls us to do, both individually and corporately?

It’s one of my favorite stories in the prophets, found in Ezekiel 37. Nearly 2,600 years ago, in a vision the prophet Ezekiel stood in a valley full of the dry bones of soldiers killed in battle. The LORD asked him, “Can these bones live?”

Ezekiel replied, “***Sovereign LORD, you alone know.***”

Then the LORD commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to those bones that the LORD would cause breath to enter them and they would again live. In the vision, that’s just what happened—bones began to rattle, then they came together. Tendons came on them, then flesh, and then skin covered them. But there was still no life in them.

Then the LORD commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath to come from the four winds, and as it did, those reconstituted bodies came to life and stood on their feet as a vast army.

This vision was about the restoration of God’s people, how he would bring them back from exile in Babylon. But what made the difference in those dry bones?

It’s interesting and significant that in both Hebrew and Greek, one word can mean wind, breath, or spirit.

Even when those bones had come together and were covered with tendons, flesh, and skin, they were still dead, until God’s breath—the Spirit of God—blew on them. *Then* they came to life! The Spirit made all the difference! God was promising to put his Spirit in his people!

I don’t know all that God has planned for our church, what he may be calling us to be and to do in mission and ministry as we lean into the future together.

But one thing I do know—*whatever* he calls us to be and do, whatever particular shape his mission and ministry through us takes and will take, we will only be able to fulfill it in *his* strength and by *his* power—through the power of his Holy Spirit working in us and among us and through us.

Please tell me I’m not the only one this happens to—I’m trying to get some kind of electrical gadget to work, but it won’t. I fiddle and fiddle with it, and try everything I know to get it to work, but it simply won’t. And then I look around and think to myself, “Well, it sure would help to plug it in to the power source!”

†MEG

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (2011 edition).