



*To Know Christ . . .
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina
Dr. Mark E. Gaskins, *Senior Pastor*
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When the Holy Spirit Comes Acts 2:1-21

Today is Pentecost Sunday. In the Christian Year, Pentecost is the seventh Sunday following Easter. In Eastertide, we focus on the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Pentecost brings Eastertide to a close as we focus on how God poured out His Holy Spirit on the church.

The Feast of Pentecost

Now traditionally, Pentecost was known to the Jews as the “Feast of Weeks.” The Old Testament Law prescribed three major Jewish festivals that were to be observed each year. Pentecost was the best attended of the three. Since it took place in the late spring, it was the best time of the year to travel, especially by sea.

Pentecost was a joyous celebration of the wheat harvest. It recognized that the harvest was a gift from God. Seven weeks (by Jewish reckoning, fifty days) after Passover, a priest would offer to God in the temple two loaves made from the first fruits of the harvest. This offering was presented to God *before* the harvest began. It was a time to praise God for His gracious provision for His people.

But through the centuries, Pentecost had also come to be associated with the commemoration of the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai, and thus the Mosaic covenant.¹

The feasts were always joyous, festive celebrations, all of them, because they celebrated God's mighty acts on behalf of His people. Passover and Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Lights (Hanukkah)—all these festivals were times of deep yearnings. They stirred expectations about the coming of the Messiah, God's Anointed One. Many of the Jews thought the Messiah, the Son of David, 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 and eagerly waiting for His appearing!

Little did they know that this Pentecost would be far different than any they'd ever experienced before!

A Pentecost to remember

When John the Baptist was preaching in the Judean wilderness near the Jordan River before Jesus began His public ministry, he declared to those who came to listen to him:

“I indeed baptize you with water; but One who is mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you

with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16).²

After Jesus had been crucified and raised from the dead, He spent forty days with His disciples demonstrating the reality of His resurrection and giving them further instructions. Not long before He ascended to the Father in heaven, Jesus told His disciples:

“Behold, I send the Promise of my Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:49).

In Acts 1, Luke tells us about Jesus’ last appearance to His disciples before His ascension. Luke reminds us that on an earlier occasion, Jesus commanded them:

not to depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the Promise of the Father, “which,” He said, “you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:4-5).

When Jesus was ready to ascend to the Father, He met with His disciples one more time. Sensing something big was soon going to happen, they asked Jesus if it was at this time that He was going to restore the kingdom to Israel. Sadly, sometimes they just still didn’t get it!

Jesus’ response was a mild rebuke—basically a “That’s none of your business”—with a parting promise:

“It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:7-8).

Then He was taken up in a cloud before their very eyes.

Despite all they had seen and experienced, there was still a part of them longing for the restoration of a glorious earthly kingdom, in which they would hold prominent seats of *power*.

But Jesus said to them in effect, “You’re interested in power? Here’s when you’ll receive power—when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And He will empower you to be My witnesses to all the world!”

Jesus had made it clear that He would send the Holy Spirit as the fulfillment of the Father’s promise.

And now, for ten days, Jesus’ followers (a group of about 120 people at this point) had been together, getting things in order and spending time—a lot of time—in prayer. Since Judas Iscariot had abdicated his role as an apostle when he betrayed Jesus, the leaders chose Matthias by casting lots to become the twelfth apostle. And they kept praying. And they kept waiting.

And then the Day of Pentecost came.

That Pentecost seemed ordinary enough as it started out. As usual, there were Jews from all over the Greco-Roman world there for the feast.

But then it happened. As the followers of Jesus were gathered together in one place, they *heard a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind* filling the house they were in. Then they *saw* what looked like tongues made of fire that separated from each other, then came to rest on

each of them. [T]hey were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues (languages), as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:2-4).

Wind . . . fire . . . power . . . It's interesting that in both Hebrew and Greek, one word is used for wind, breath, and *spirit*—*ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek. Fire is often associated in the Old Testament with a *theophany*—God's appearance to people in some form. For instance, the cloud that led the Israelites through the wilderness appeared as a fiery pillar in the sky at night.

What Jesus' followers heard and saw and experienced all showed them that God was up to *something big* here!

Empowered and enabled by the Spirit to do so, this small band began to proclaim the gospel to the multitudes who came together in bewilderment to listen to them speaking. You see, God had gotten their attention.

The way that Luke lists the homelands of those who were there is intended to imply that there were people from all over the Roman world there that day. Most, if not all of them, probably knew the Greek language. It was, after all, the language of business and commerce, sort of like English today. You pretty much had to know at least a little Greek to get along in the world in that day. Some of them may even have known some Aramaic from attending the synagogue. Certainly those native to Palestine did, since that was their mother tongue.

But Greek wasn't what they were hearing.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, those followers of Jesus were preaching the gospel in *other* languages, so that everybody there that day was hearing it their *native* language and dialect—the language they spoke in their homes, their *heart language*. And they were amazed, since they realized that those who were speaking were Galileans, who were not known for their linguistic skills.

Skeptics tried to discredit them by accusing them of being drunk. But Peter raised his voice and addressed them all, saying that they certainly weren't drunk, since it was only **the third hour of the day**, the ancient Jewish way of saying 9:00 A.M. Then he pointed to what Joel the prophet had said about how God promised to pour out His Spirit on all people in the last days, so that their sons and daughters and God's male and female servants would prophesy, and young men would see visions and old men would dream dreams. God would show **wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath**, and everyone who would **call on the name of the LORD** would be saved (2:17-21).

Peter then went on to preach about Jesus, His life, His crucifixion and resurrection, His ascension and exaltation at the right hand of God, and how God had made Him both Lord and Christ. He called on the people to repent and put their faith in Jesus and be baptized, with the promise that they too would receive the Holy Spirit. And that day, about 3,000 people believed and were baptized!

Peter said that what was happening that day was a fulfillment of the word of the Lord—both Joel's prophecy and Jesus' promise! *Honoring His promise through Jesus and Scripture, God poured out His Spirit on the church* at Pentecost. And look what happened when the Spirit came!

The presence and power of the Spirit

When the Holy Spirit comes, His presence and power make all the difference. That old hymn *Brethren, We Have Met to Worship* gets it right when it says:

All is vain unless the Spirit
Of the Holy One comes down.³

Jesus' promise of the Spirit was a promise of His power—not *our* own power, but *God's* power, not for *our* purposes, but for *His* purposes through us!

Don't forget that Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in bodily form as a dove when He was praying after His baptism (Luke 3:21-22). And when Jesus launched His public ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth, He claimed Isaiah 61:1-2 as His mission statement, which begins:

**The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me . . .”** (Luke 4:18).

If the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit were vital to Jesus' ministry and mission, then *certainly* they are for us! The fact is, we're totally ineffective, unproductive, and powerless without them. Jesus has commanded us to make disciples of all nations, to bear witness about Him to the ends of the earth. Without Him, we can do nothing. Without His Spirit, we can't do what He calls us to do.

But here's the good news. *When the Holy Spirit comes, He empowers his church for His mission in the world.* That's us! The Spirit came at Pentecost, and He comes time and time again throughout history. He always dwells within believers, and among His people in the church. But sometimes God gives fresh outpourings that have a similar character as that first Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection—something *we* desperately need in the church in North America right now!

Do you remember the 18th century American Puritan Jonathan Edwards' fiery sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”? Maybe you read it in high school or college in an American Literature class.

It was styled after sermons that were preached to criminals condemned to die. But Edwards made the bold move to preach this sermon to his congregation at Northampton, Massachusetts to remind them that even respectable church people are sinners who need God's grace. It appeared to have little, if any, effect on them.

But then a few weeks later he preached this very same sermon at Enfield, Connecticut accompanied by screams from sinners under conviction and joyful weeping from those who were trusting Jesus.

Same sermon, probably the same delivery, totally different responses. What was the difference? Was it the preacher? No. The people? They probably weren't that different in each church. So what was the difference?

In a way that's just beyond explanation, *the Holy Spirit came!*⁴

†MEG

¹ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1997), 40.

² Scripture taken from the New King James Version.

³ Words by George Atkins, *The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Lifeway Worship, 2008), Hymn 386.

⁴ Stephen R. Holmes, “A Mind on Fire,” *Christian History* (Issue 77), p. 13;
<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2003/may/14414.html> (accessed 5/17/2018).