



# COME, HOLY SPIRIT

SERIES: *THE SPREADING FLAME*

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Acts 2:1-13

Third Message

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The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was the final act of Jesus' saving ministry before his second coming. Here is how John Stott put it:

The one who took on our humanity and died for our sins, who rose from the dead and ascended to the Father, would now send his Spirit to his people, to make them his body and work out in them what he had won for them. Without the Holy Spirit Christian discipleship would be inconceivable, even impossible. There can be no life without a 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.<sup>1</sup>

That is why Jesus told his disciples to wait for the Spirit. On the night before he was crucified, he told them that apart from him they could do nothing. He modeled for them what it was like to live life dependent on the Father, "full of the Spirit," "led by the Spirit," and "anointed by the Spirit."

This is hard to accept for many who pride themselves in self-sufficiency. We tend to picture those whom God uses as powerful, stern-faced, determined zealots who take on the task of single-handedly correcting a crooked world. But we don't find this model in Scripture. God uses people who know their limitations.

We may weep over our inability, but it is our ability that God fears. Powerful people are the most bothersome to him. Those who rush around in their own strength, who are overly optimistic, believing in themselves and their own power and personality, often get in God's way. "The flesh profits nothing," said Jesus. Unaided humanity is useless. The problem with many of us is that we're much too gifted. As David Roper puts it, we are "perilously adequate." We're so good at what we do that we're no good at all.

We were created to be vessels filled with God. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Corinthians, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor 4:7). Our bodies are earthen vessels. They are common vessels — peanut-butter jars. Our significance lies in what is inside us. We were intended to be filled and flooded with the life of God. We will never know what it means to be a real man or woman until we know that that is our real significance.

So we come to the second chapter of Acts. The text has three sections. First, Luke's report of the Pentecost event itself (verses 1-13); second, the explanation of the event, given by Peter in his sermon (14-36); and third, its result and effect on the life of the Jerusalem church (37-47). We will take the first part of the chapter today.

This passage is much misunderstood. More strange beliefs have come from it than almost any other text in the New Testament. So it is important that we have a correct understanding of what Luke is communicating here.

**When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.** (Acts 2:1-4, NASB)

Luke opens with a brief, matter-of-fact reference to the time and place of the Spirit's coming. Pentecost is a feast day. It is called that because it occurs on the fiftieth day after Passover. (Pentecost is merely a transliteration of the Greek word for fifty.) The Jews also referred to it as the Feast of Weeks, because it came seven weeks after Passover, or a week of weeks. They also referred to it as the Feast of First Fruits, because they presented their tithe of the wheat harvest on that day. So the feast had two meanings, one agricultural, the other historical.

Luke writes, "They were together in one place." He doesn't specify where; whether the house in verse 2 is still the upper room or one of the many rooms or halls in the temple in which they regularly met. The 120 were together, as they had been during those ten days, studying the Scriptures, praying, fellowshiping together, and waiting, as the Lord had commanded.

That is when the event that they had been anticipating occurred: the promised Holy Spirit came. His coming was accompanied by three supernatural signs: a sound, a sight, and strange speech.

First, they heard something: "a noise like a violent rushing wind." It didn't blow things around in the room. It simply sounded like a violent wind. Next, they saw something: a flame entered the room. It began to

divide and sub divide, so that eventually a small tongue of flame rested over the head of every individual in the room. Then they experienced something. They didn't necessarily feel anything, but something happened to them: "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues" (or better translated "languages," as we will see in a moment).

Everyone in the room was filled with the Spirit. This was in accordance with Jesus' promise to the disciples that he would come again. He told them, "I am with you, but I will be in you." He would come to indwell them. He would flood their humanity, and he would live in them. He would not be visible to them as he had been in the years of his incarnation, but he would be just as real. He would indwell everyone who would put their trust in him. This was the wondrous thing that happened at Pentecost.

In interpreting this text it is important to distinguish between reality and symbol. Several symbols are used here: wind, fire, and languages. The reality is the coming and filling of the Holy Spirit. But his coming was invisible. That is why the Lord arranged an audiovisual demonstration so that those who were present could see what was happening and hear what was going on.

Luke elaborates on only the third symbol, the languages (verses 5-11), but I would like to comment on each of them.

Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, wind is symbolic of the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. In both Hebrew and Greek, the major ancient languages in which the Scriptures are written, the word for Spirit and the word for wind or breath are the same.

The disciples wouldn't have missed that connection. In Genesis, the text says that the Spirit of God, the dynamic, life-giving Spirit of God, blew across the waters. God created Adam from the dust of the ground, but it was only after God breathed into Adam's nostrils that he became a living being. Apart from the breath or the wind of God, the Spirit of God, man is merely dust. Jesus said to Nicodemus: "You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:7-8, NIV).

Just as in the beginning, when God breathed into Adam and he became a living being, so it is today. If one is to become spiritually alive, God must breathe into him by his Holy Spirit. Wind therefore is an appropriate symbol of the power of the Spirit of God who moves in people in unexplainable ways.

Fire, the second symbol, is a symbol of the presence of God. The tabernacle, the flame over the Ark of the Covenant, the pillar of fire by night and smoke during the day, were symbols of the presence of God in the OT.

David Roper makes the observation that at Pentecost, everyone in that room had his own pillar of fire, when fire entered the room as one flame and subdivided. This was a picture that God was indwelling his people, not a tent made of skin or a temple. We are the temple of God today.<sup>2</sup>

The third symbol was languages: "They began to speak with other tongues." "Languages" is a better translation, because that is what these were. They were not ecstatic but intelligent utterances. These were not angelic languages but known foreign languages. We know that is so because the term that is used means "other languages." Unfortunately, the KJV translates this term as "strange tongues." It doesn't mean "strange tongue" in the sense that it was a language never heard on earth. It was "other" in the sense that the people speaking were using languages other than their own mother tongue.

We also know that they were known foreign language because, as we will see in a moment, the people who heard the sound said, "we each hear them in our own language to which we were born." So that there would be no doubt, Luke lists the places where these people came from. These "tongues" were known foreign languages. They were a symbol of the universal scope of the church. These people were to go to the whole world and preach the gospel to everyone, in every language. The kingdom of God would be a multi-racial, multi-national, multi-lingual kingdom!

Luke elaborates on this third symbol, in verses 5-11:

**Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. They were amazed and astonished, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." (2:5-11)**

The holy time between Passover and Pentecost drew hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world into Jerusalem. Luke says there were Jews from all parts of the Roman Empire gathered there. Josephus, the Jewish historian, records that the city could be crowded with over a million people at this time.

Luke emphasizes the international nature of the crowd by recording the nationalities of those present. First, there were "Parthians and Medes and Elamites,

and residents of Mesopotamia." These were people who lived off to the east of Palestine. Many of them were descendants of the deportations of Jews by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. There were people from "Judea," i.e., those who lived in Syria and Palestine. Others were from "Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia," what is today Turkey and Asia Minor. Next were the North Africans: "Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes" (gentiles who had converted to Judaism). All of these people had gathered in Jerusalem for this historic occasion.

Afterwards they scattered into the streets and began to proclaim the gospel, the good news in the languages that were represented, attracting the attention of all. The people had heard the same sound as the disciples, which seemed like a violent rushing wind, and began to gather from all over. Note Luke's words in 7-8: "They were amazed and astonished, saying, 'Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?'"

What amazed them was that they heard the mysterious sound of certain men and women, apparently uneducated people from Galilee, speaking in more than sixteen different languages. Galileans had a reputation for being uncultured. They had trouble pronouncing gutturals, and their accent was considered provincial by the people of Jerusalem. They were considered country bumpkins. And these bystanders heard these Galileans speaking their own languages fluently, but with a Galilean accent — languages they had probably never previously heard yet alone spoke! Suddenly they had amazing linguistic powers.

Luke adds in verse 11: "we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." The phrase translated "mighty deeds" is used only one other time in the NT. Mary, the mother of Jesus, used it in her *Magnificat*, when she declared the great things God had done for her. So when these disciples began to speak in other tongues they were not merely praising God, they were talking about the mighty saving acts of God. Possibly they were declaring the story of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. They were preaching and evangelizing in another language. That is what amazed people. Many of them were confronted for the first time with the truth that God spoke their language!

In verses 12-13 we learn that the crowd's reaction was divided.

**And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others were mocking and saying, "They are full of sweet wine." (2:12-13)**

Luke uses two words to express their astonishment: amazed, and perplexed. "Amazed" literally means, "to

put out of place," to be pushed out of your senses. Eugene Petersen in *The Message* puts it this way: "their heads were spinning." We might say, it blew their minds. They were not only astonished, they were perplexed. Some committed the deadly mistake of crediting supernatural events to natural causes. Spiritually indifferent, they went on their own self-sufficient way, dismissing what happened with ridicule: "They're drunk." But the open and curious inquired, "What does this mean?"

Peter will go on to tell them that what they had just witnessed was neither unexpected nor unexplained. He would remind them that what they saw was the fulfillment of Scripture, when God promised to pour out his Spirit upon *all* flesh. The Holy Spirit would bring life and power to anyone who would allow God to flood his or her humanity. It doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor, male or female. It doesn't make any difference what shape you are in, how tall you are, what color you are, or where you went to school. God wants to indwell your humanity.

I want to make a comment here. In light of this passage, some may need to reevaluate their understanding of the gift of tongues. I have no desire to be critical of those who are in the charismatic movement. They are Christians, and they should never be excluded from the body; they are a part of the body. But we should always evaluate the gift of tongues in light of the Scriptural standard.

When we hear of the gift of tongues, we should always ask, is it a known foreign language? Can it be evaluated in terms of syntax and grammar? And secondly, does it involve the proclamation of the gospel to unbelievers? Some who claim to have this gift say that it is used in worship as a means of helping believers in their prayer life. But both here in Acts 2 and in 1 Corinthians 14, the same two criteria are present: it is a known foreign language, and it is for unbelievers. We cannot say that the gift has ceased once for all. But where it does occur, we have to apply these same two tests: Is it a known foreign language? And, is it a sign to unbelievers that the gospel is being proclaimed to the whole world?

Having said that, I also want to say that tongues are not the point of this passage. The point here is that God wants to inhabit our bodies and flood us and fill us with his presence. Being born again means opening yourself up to the mighty power, the rushing wind of the Spirit of God.

I will close with some powerful words on the importance of the Holy Spirit's ministry in our lives, from the pen of Charles Haddon Spurgeon:

Common, too common is the sin of forgetting the Holy Spirit. This is folly and ingratitude...As God, He is good essentially...He is good benevolently, tenderly bearing with our waywardness, striving with our rebellious wills; quickening us from our death in sin, and then training us for the skies as a loving nurse fosters her child...He is good operatively. All His works are good in the most eminent degree: He suggests good thoughts, prompts good actions, reveals good truths, applies good promises, assists in good attainments, and leads to good results. There is no spiritual good in all the world of which He is not the author and sustainer...They who yield to His influence become good; they who obey His impulses do good, they who live under His power receive

good...Let us revere His person, and adore Him as God over all, blessed for ever; let us own His power, and our need of Him by waiting upon Him in all our holy enterprises; let us hourly seek His aid, and never grieve Him; and let us speak to His praise whenever occasions occur. The church will never prosper until more reverently it believes in the Holy Ghost.<sup>3</sup>

1. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), 60.

2. David Roper, *The Coming of the Spirit*, a message preached at Cole Community Church, Boise, Idaho, May 30, 1982.

3. Quoted from Charles Swindoll's book, *Flying Closer to the Flame* (Waco: Word, 1993), 263.

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