

Bible Study 5 – Acts 2:1-13 – Pentecost and the birthday of the New Testament Church.

We pick up where we left off last time. Our focus is on Acts chapter 2, verses 1 through 13. When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

5 Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6 And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. 7 And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, 11 both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” 12 And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” 13 But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

Our theme is thus Pentecost and the pouring out of the Spirit as promised. This event marks the birthday of the New Testament Church or more accurately the church in this New Covenant era. It fulfils God’s promise particularly articulated through the prophets, Ezekiel and Jeremiah. For example, in the latter we read:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. 33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Interestingly, the close association of the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai with Pentecost commemorations became a prominent feature in Second Temple Judaism. And anticipated this New Covenant age when the Spirit would write God’s Law of Love on the hearts of his people. One of the early church fathers, Saint Jerome wrote: "There is Sinai, here Sion; there the trembling mountain, here the trembling house; there the flaming mountain, here the flaming tongues; there the noisy thunderings, here the sounds of many tongues; there the clangour of the ramshorn, here the notes of the gospel-trumpet."

It is vital that we grasp the fulfilment of Old Testament promise in the pouring out of the Spirit upon the church at Pentecost. And understand the biblical use of allegory, analogy, metaphor, simile, symbolism, and the like.

Also, it is worth noting that the Lord Jesus also made clear to his disciples why it was necessary that he ascend to the Father’s side as a prelude to the pouring out and subsequent enlightening, equipping, and empowering of the Holy Spirit. (See John 14:15-27, 16:7-15). Just as Jesus was anointed and filled with the Spirit as a prelude to his earthly ministry, so, his followers are similarly endued with the Spirit for their ministry and mission. Consider therefore:

1. The church waited in Jerusalem in anticipation at Pentecost: When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place (1).

a) The church abides in one location. They were together in the Upper Room and we previously considered its significance as a place familiar to them as the building where Jesus had taught them, shared his last Passover meal with them and instituted the sacrament of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. It was also, no doubt, functional. A place known to them and commodious enough to allow the church to gather for prayer, praise, preaching, and fellowship.

b) The church awaits in one accord at the annual feast of Pentecost. Pentecost was one of three great feasts or holy commemorations and celebrations that were mandated in the Old Testament Law. We read in Exodus 23: "Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me. 15 You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. None shall appear before me empty-handed. 16 You shall keep the Feast of Harvest, of the firstfruits of your labour, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour. 17 Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord GOD. And this helps to explain why there are Jews from all over Israel and the wider diaspora (known world) in Jerusalem at that time. It will come as no surprise to learn that the symbolism and significance of Pentecost is simply full of meaning.

Pentecost was observed on the 50th day, or seven weeks plus one day, after the Passover. It marked the fruition of the barley harvest which had begun at the time of the waving of the first ripe sheaf [see Leviticus 23:9-23]. If Pentecost was kept in accordance with the Old Testament institution and instruction, then the Spirit was poured out upon the church on the Lord's Day. 10 days after Christ's ascension, and 50 from his death and resurrection. Understanding such things, provides us with a deeper appreciation of biblical analogy and interconnectedness. It enables us to see how God fulfils his promises and thereby deepens our faith in him and gives us confidence in his word. It also helps our understanding of other passages. For example, the Apostle Paul uses the 'firstfruits' motif with reference to the resurrection to come when he writes: For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ (1Cor.15:22-23).

c) The church anticipates the fulfilment of Christ's promise in the anointing with the Spirit of power. The Lord Jesus had told them to wait for the Spirit. And his word is true. He is Truth personified. His promises are yes and amen. He does not disappoint. His word is his bond. 2. The church's prayers are answered audibly and visibly with the anointing of the promised Holy Spirit: And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them (2-3).

a) Note the direction from which the Spirit came: And suddenly there came from heaven. We are being left in no doubt that this is the promised Holy Spirit who is being poured out upon the church by the Father, in fulfilment of the Son's promise. He is heaven-sent. The gift of God, who is God.

b) Note the distinctive sound and sight signs that accompanied the Spirit: a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them. The wind is often associated with God in the Bible. While the wind like the Spirit cannot be seen its presence is often heard and seen.

I will never forget a gale one night when we lived on Skye. The gusts were more than 100mph. And at one point I opened the back door to let the dog out to do his business. Well, he took a swift look and retreated inside. But the howling noise was deafening, and the fence and hedge were almost horizontal! And so here in our text the mighty rushing wind denotes the Spirit's presence and power. The divided tongues as of fire similarly denote the Spirit's

presence and purpose. Fire is similarly used in the Scripture to symbolise God's presence. Think on the burning bush! Here he is visibly manifest and will enlighten, empower or energise, and enflame the hearts of God's people with love. And he will give them utterance and confidence to proclaim Christ's gospel near and far.

c) Note the down-pouring of the Spirit impacted the whole church: and rested on each one of them. The Spirit resides in the church, uniting God's people to Christ. Each Christian is indwelt by the Spirit of holiness, although gifts and graces may differ. And we are called to show forth the fruits of the Spirit in word and work - the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law (Gal.5:22-23).

3. The church's members were all filled with the Spirit and began to acclaim the good news in unlearned (foreign) languages: And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance (4).

a) The early church was lavishly equipped with the Spirit: And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. They were now ably equipped for their ministry and mission to the world. That they were filled is tantamount to saying they were fully under the influence of the Spirit of God.

b) The early church was lucidly empowered and emboldened by the Spirit to proclaim the gospel: And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. In this we see something of the beginning of a process designed to reverse the ungodly divisiveness associated with Babel. (See Genesis 11:1-9). God is bringing humanity back into harmony with himself and one another in Jesus Christ, where true unity is established. Here [in Christ's church] there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all (Col.3:11). And this is the reason why the church is to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour throughout the world.

c) The early church was led by the Spirit who enlightened the word: as the Spirit gave them utterance. The Spirit provided and prompted, and would pilot the church, as we shall see in the coming weeks and months.

4. The church amazes and astonishes many by its apostolic witness: Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6 And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. 7 And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, 11 both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." 12 And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine." (5-13).

a) The call to fulfil Christ's commission now begins in earnest. The church is to disciple all nations beginning at Jerusalem. And here at the outset of the church's mission we discover Jews and proselytes (God-fearers) from many nations hearing the gospel of God's amazing grace in their own language.

b) The call to faith in God's Christ is catholic. It is universal. The gospel is to be preached to every creature.

c) The call to further Christ's cause and kingdom is challenging and will often incur the aspersions and opposition of unbelievers: And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."

And therefore, some responded with astonishment, bewilderment, and perplexity. Others mocked and ridiculed these early Christians decrying their faith and denouncing them on nationalistic or racial grounds. And hence some would dismiss and denounce them as uneducated and unsophisticated Galileans. Sadly, some will even exhibit animosity and hatred as the Lord Jesus had forewarned and as shall see as we progress through the Acts of the Apostles.

Questions for pondering!

1. Why should we read the Old as well as the New Testament scriptures?
2. What is the Christian significance of Pentecost?
3. What evidence is there to suggest the Spirit is still at work in our individual and corporate lives?