

May 7 Lesson: The Day of Pentecost

Spring Quarter: Jesus Calls Us
Unit 3: The Birth of the Church
Lesson 10: Week of May 7, 2023
By Dr. Hal Brady

Lesson Scriptures: Acts 2:1-8, 14-24, 37-40

Key Verse: Acts 2:39

Lesson Aims

1. List the ways the Holy Spirit was active on Pentecost.
2. Explain why the Day of Pentecost was ideal for the birth of the church.
3. Write a prayer for empowerment by the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus more boldly.

A taxi driver in New York City said to his passenger, a minister, why doesn't God do something really big all around the world so that everyone would believe in Him and that would solve all of our terrible problems? The truth is, God has done some really colossal things! Consider the creation, the Exodus, the virgin birth, the cross, the resurrection; and then there was Pentecost and the Promise of Pentecost.

Lesson Context: The Holy Spirit

The descent of the Holy Spirit "like a dove" on Jesus at his baptism might suggest a picture of peace and acceptance (Luke 3:22). But the work of the Holy Spirit was not always a pleasant experience for those affected, since Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16). Imageries of fire in the Bible are associated with the destruction of God's enemies (Ezekiel 22:17-22, 31; Hebrews 10:26-27; 2 Peter 3:7, etc.) and the testing or purification of his people (Zechariah 13:8-9; 1 Corinthians 3:12-13; 1 Peter 1:6-7). The depiction in Luke 3:16 speaks of the power to do both, especially in light of the winnowing fork imagery of Luke 3:17.

Lesson Context: The Jewish Calendar

The most important observance on Israel's calendar was Passover. It was a time to remember deliverance from slavery in Egypt, when God's angel of death "passed over" Israelite households that had been marked with the blood of a lamb (Exodus 12).

Within a few weeks of leaving Egypt, the people of Israel arrived at Mount Sinai (Exodus 16:1; 31:18). There they entered into a covenant with God, agreeing to be his people while the Lord promised to be their God. For centuries thereafter, the Old Testament covenant people celebrated their deliverance on Passover and followed it 50 days later by celebrating God's giving of the lamb. Pentecost occurs seven weeks after the Passover Sabbath plus one day, which equals 50 days; it was one of the three great pilgrimage festivals (Deuteronomy 16:9,16). This celebration is also called "The Festival of Harvest," "The Festival of Weeks," and the "Day of the firstfruit" (Exodus 13:16a; 34:22a; Numbers 28:26).

The Jews in the time of Jesus had a marvelous temple in Jerusalem (Mark 13:1). The city's economy centered on that structure, as the periodic influx of visiting Jews brought in money. We might say that the Jerusalem of the time had a tourist economy, and the height of the tourist was the period from Passover to Pentecost. Many visitors would stay for the entire 50-day period between those two observances.

I. The Holy Spirit Comes (Acts 2:1-8)

The apostles continued to wait in Jerusalem as instructed by Jesus. There were eleven apostles from the original 12, Judas Iscariot having committed suicide (Matthew 27:8). The followers grew in number to about 120 (Acts 1:12-15).

“The day of Pentecost” marked the final full day of the Passover-to-Pentecost season. Most who were visiting Jerusalem to attend these observances would begin returning home the next day.

The fact that those gathered were “all together” suggests a shared priority: that of intense communal prayer (Acts 1:14). It had been 10 days since Jesus' departure, and the mood of those 120 was undoubtedly one of hopeful expectation. Seven weeks prior, the disciples had also been gathered together; but on that occasion they had gathered in fear (John 20:19). But being able to gather “in one place” was not to last long; soon enough, persecution would cause Jesus' followers to scatter (Acts 8:1).

When the Holy Spirit came, he was not visible. However, he made his presence known in two ways. There was an appeal to two of the gates through which all humankind receives his/her information - the ear-gate and the eye-gate. We hear and we see. The Holy Spirit used both these gates.

Through the ear-gate they heard the sound of a “blowing terrible wind from heaven,” and this sound filled the whole house where they were. The phrase “from heaven” signifies that we are intended to understand it as being of divine origin and note that it was not a wind, it was the sound of the wind. Probably the sound was not like the sound of wind blowing through tree tops but rather like the sound of a tornado. Everybody who has been through a tornado says that train sound is bad and scary.

The second appeal of the Holy Spirit was through the eye-gate. Some have interpreted this as a river of fire coming out of the sky. The word translated “separated” is translated “divided” in other places.

The separation of the tongues of fire “to rest on each of them” (v.3) seems to suggest that though under the Old Covenant the divine presence rested on Israel as a corporate entity and upon many of its leaders for special purposes, under the new covenant established by Jesus and inaugurated at Pentecost, the Spirit now rests on each believer individually. Of course, this does not negate the importance of the corporate relationship with God, as Paul's letters amply demonstrate. But from now on, the corporate rises out of a personal relationship with God through the Holy Spirit

and this is in keeping with the prediction through Jeremiah that in the new covenant, the Law will be written on the heart (Jeremiah 31:33).

In verse 4, the sound and sight are followed by an act of empowerment as the Holy Spirit fills the followers of Jesus. The Spirit was active in Old Testament days, but only with a few of God's people (example, see Numbers 11:25-29). But now the promise of God's is coming to fulfillment, the promise that he will pour his Spirit on his people (Isaiah 44:3-5; 32:15; Joel 2:28).

The "devout Jews" in verse 5 had come from everywhere because of the Festival of Pentecost. This was their reason for being in Jerusalem. The sound the people of Jerusalem heard had never been heard before, so they came rushing. We are told that they became bewildered, "for each one heard their own language being spoken."

The setting is clearly multilingual. The common trade language of the day was Greek. "Jews of the Jerusalem" area would also speak Aramaic. The fact that those gathered Jews were "from every nation under heaven" certainly would have included those whose native tongues was Latin. And other languages are implied as well.

The fact that "each one heard their own language being spoken" is thus the third great miraculous phenomenon. The word translated "bewilderment" implies confusion combined with a strong emotional reaction.

The fact that those who were speaking were recognized as "Galileans" is probably due to their accent and manner of dress. The multiplicity of native tongues that the crowd hears comes into sharper focus as provinces of origin are detailed in Acts 2:9-11 (not in today's text). Here, we make sure not to miss the miracle: those listening, who hailed from a dozen or more provinces, heard the message of the gospel in languages the speakers had not studied.

II. The Apostle Preacher

Acts 2:14-24

Even in the midst of miracles, there were always unbelievers and doubters (compare Luke 11:15). Likewise, some of those who experienced this particular miracle doubted. They even suggested that those speaking might be drunk (Acts 2:13).

In verses 14 and 15, Peter quickly discredits the charge of drunkenness. "Nine in the morning" is a most unlikely time for indulgence.

Moving immediately from what the phenomenon (Pentecost) was "not" to what it "was," Peter points to the "prophet Joel." By some estimates, Joel prophesied in the eighth century BC, but exact dates are unknown. What he had predicted had been a long time in coming to pass, but come to pass it had!

Two things stand out regarding Peter's quote of Joel 2:28-32. First is the announcement of the arrival of "the last days" (17a), the final period of human history, as evidenced by the outpouring

of God's "Spirit." We understand this to mean that what remains are the events of the end of time: the return of Christ and the final judgment.

Second, the validation for Peter's claim is the return of prophecy and the various methods by which prophecies come about. The Jews had not experienced prophecy for generations. Joel's language points to the pouring out of the "Spirit," evoking the image of a deluge that cannot be contained.

A word about prophecy! To prophecy is to speak or write a message received from God directly, not through a book or through another teacher. Peter and the apostles were prophesizing as they spoke under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

In verses 19 and 20, we see that the special effects that accompany the outpouring of the Spirit are also noteworthy. In their original prophetic setting, these dramatic occurrences signaled the imminent arrival of the "Day of the Lords" in judgment of the nations that treated Israel shamefully. However, not so in Acts. In this new setting, the "signs and wonders" mark the presence and progress of the Spirit who prepares the way for the church's missionary work (see Acts 2:43; 4:16, 22, 30; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6,13; 14:3; 15:12). In this context, then, "the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day" no longer conjures up images of God's imminent retribution but instead that of Pentecost, with its promises of empowered witness and God's salvation.

Peter ended his quotation of the ancient prophet with a shortened version of what he (Peter) went on to give in fuller form in Acts 2:38-39.

Everyone present surely was aware of "Jesus of Nazareth" and his reputation as a miracle worker (compare Acts 26:26). Since working a miracle was a demonstration of divine power, Peter demanded acknowledgement that God was the source of supernatural activity. The three Greek words translated "miracles, wonders and signs" point to a larger reality – "God" himself. The same Greek words occur together in various passages of scriptures (examples, 2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:4).

In verse 23, we see that the crowd was also aware of the shameful death of Jesus several weeks earlier "with the help of wicked men." Peter, however, saw no reason in this to doubt the plan of God, especially given what happened after the crucifixion.

Important point! The cross was no accident. It belonged to the eternal plan of God (verse 23). As one scholar observed, "the cross was a window in time to allow us to see the suffering love which is eternally in the heart of God." So Jesus died on the cross to demonstrate the length and depths God would go to show us how much we are loved.

Note that even though the cross was part of the eternal plan of God, it did not remove the responsibility of those who sought to betray Him – "the wicked men" (read Luke 22:22).

We see in verse 24 that God's plan did not terminate with Jesus' death, since God had "raised" him to live again. Surely many in the crowd had heard rumors about the appearances of the risen Lord!

III. The Crowd Reacts (Acts 2:37-39)

Peter offered further proof that “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36). This drew notable reaction. We perceive the crowd as having believed Peter and accepting his interpretation of events as true. This terrified them, thus their plea, “what shall we do?”

At this point, Peter gives two stipulations and promises two blessings. They must repent and be baptized, and they will receive the forgiveness of sin and experience the Holy Spirit. As Lord, Jesus demands repentance and baptism, which is an outward expression of allegiance to him. As Savior, he offers the unmerited gift of forgiveness. And there is no separation of the Lordship of Christ from his role as Savior here.

Some have understood the statement, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (verse 38), as implying that baptism is a necessary requirement for salvation. But, as some scholars point out, that interpretation may read too much into that text. In the home of Cornelius those present received the Spirit and spoke in tongues before they were baptized (Acts 10:44-48).

A New Testament scholar named F.F. Bruce says, “It is against the whole genius of biblical religion to suppose that the outward rite would have any value except insofar as it was accompanied by the work of grace within.” He points to the similar situation in Acts 3:19, where the blotting out of the peoples’ sins is the direct consequence of their repenting and turning to God...nothing is said about baptism, although it is no doubt implied. Take note, however, that the idea of an unbaptized believer does not seem to be entertained in the New Testament.

A further word about the importance of Baptism. The apostle Paul later explained that to “be baptized” was to be “buried” with [Jesus]...into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead...we too may live a new life (see Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12). He further noted that “all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27). There is nothing magical about the waters of baptism, rather, baptism is God’s chosen time when regeneration and renewal happen (Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:21). As such, baptism is not a human work of merit; rather, it is a work of God.

“Unto you, and to your children,” God’s message was offered to the people of that generation and to their descendants. The Messiah’s kingdom was to be an everlasting kingdom. “And for all who are far off” – the promise was not only to Jews who worshiped God, but also to Gentiles who were far from Him and His people. They too could be redeemed if they would repent and be baptized.

“For all whom the Lord will call”—God extended His call and offered His promise to everyone and that includes you and me. But, of course, the blessings of the Messiah’s kingdom will be available only by those who respond to His call.

So what happened to Peter at that first Pentecost can happen to us. On the night of the crucifixion, it was Peter near the fire. He followed afar off and warmed himself by the fire. Then it was Peter in the fire, when he failed to live up to his boast and denied his Lord and got into trouble. But on the day of Pentecost, it was Peter on fire, empowered by the Holy Spirit to courageous witness. We are told that what happened to Peter happened to all the disciples. And, indeed, it can happen to us today. So be it!

Action Plan

1. How would you respond to the statement that new Bible translations are not needed?
2. How can a believer's actions and attitudes cause unbelievers to show aversion to the gospel?
3. Explain how you understand the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Resources For This Lesson

1. "2022-2023 NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, Uniform Lesson, International Sunday School Lessons," pages 305-312.
2. "The NIV Application Commentary (Acts)", by Agith Fernando, pages 100-103,106.
3. "Standard Bible Commentary (Acts)" edited by Orion Root and John W. Wade, pages 11-13, 16-17.

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