

WHAT HAPPENED AT PENTECOST?

Acts 2:1-41

One Christmas morning, I was in high school at the time, I woke up early, went to the living room, and sat by the Christmas tree. Not wanting to go back to bed, and not wanting to wake anyone, I decided to read the Christmas story from the Gospels. Something happened that Christmas morning. As I started reading, the story became alive and real.

After I finished reading the Gospels, I turned to the back of my Bible and found a chart outlining all the prophecies Christ fulfilled. A number of the prophecies had to do with Jesus' birth, so I started reading them. From Isaiah I read, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). Working my way through Isaiah, I read, "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

Then it hit me: Christmas is a celebration of the Gift God gave us, a Gift born in a manger, who died on a cross. On that Christmas morning, with the early winter sun shining through a window, the true meaning of Christmas penetrated my heart and mind.

The meaning and significance of Christmas is overwhelming. However, there is another Christmas story that I bet most Christians have never read or celebrated as a Christmas story. There are two Gifts God has given us, two Advents on which our faith is built. The first was when Jesus left heaven and came to earth to dwell *with* us (Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 2:1-20). The second was when the Holy Spirit left heaven and came to earth to dwell *in* us (Acts 2:1-41). Each Advent is as important as the other,

because each Advent is dependent on the other. In a very real sense, Pentecost is the sequel to the Christmas story. Pentecost could be called “Christmas, Part Two.”

What Happened at Pentecost?

On the night of His betrayal, Jesus promised His disciples that when He left, a Counselor—the Holy Spirit—would come and would live in them forever (John 14:15-31). After His crucifixion, death, and resurrection, Jesus spent forty days with His followers before ascending into heaven. During His last conversation with His followers, Jesus instructed them, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised...in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit...But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:4, 5, & 8). Jesus ascended into heaven (Acts 1:10-11), and His followers went to Jerusalem and waited in an upstairs room (Acts 1:13). Not exactly sure what they were waiting for, or how long they would have to wait, the group (about 120 in number) prayed, and appointed Mathias as an apostle, taking the place of Judas (Acts 1:14-26).

A few days went by, then a week, and then ten days. Each day was passed praying and waiting in the upper room. On the tenth day, the day of Pentecost, “They were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:1-4).

On Christmas morning God quietly entered the world through Jesus Christ. On the day of Pentecost, God once again entered the world, but this time, instead of coming with a whisper, He came with a shout!

“Pentecost” literally means “fiftieth.” In the Jewish calendar, Pentecost marked the 50th day after Passover. The Day of Pentecost marked the beginning of a week long celebration known as the Feast of Weeks, or the Festival of First Fruits (Exodus 23:16; Leviticus 23:15-22; Numbers 28:26-31). Pentecost was (and still is) one of the three major holy days in Judaism (the other two being Passover and Tabernacles). The Day of Pentecost marked the anniversary of God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai.

What’s the significance of Pentecost? There are many. During Passover, lambs were sacrificed for the forgiveness of sin. By being crucified during Passover Jesus was proclaiming to be the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the World” (John 1:29). By sending the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, God was saying, “Your sins are forgiven. What the Law could not do (forgives sins), Jesus did. You are no longer under the curse of the Law (the Law was powerless). Now, the Spirit, who is all-powerful, controls you.” The Apostle Paul put it this way, “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). By sending the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, God was placing His stamp of approval on what Jesus had accomplished. Furthermore, He was guaranteeing eternal salvation to all who, through faith, believe in Jesus Christ.

Three things marked the coming of the Holy Spirit. Each thing symbolized the presence of God. First of all, there was a “sound like the blowing of a violent wind” (Acts 2:2). The Old Testament word, as well as the New Testament, word for “Spirit”, is literally “wind.”¹

Secondly, “They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire” (Acts 2:3). Throughout the Old Testament, fire symbolized the presence of God. God spoke to Moses through a burning bush. A pillar of fire guided the Israelites through the wilderness. Fire consumed the mountain when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The prophet Isaiah received his anointing from God by a hot coal being placed on his mouth, lips, and tongue. God said to Isaiah, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for” (Isaiah 6:7). John the Baptist prophesied, “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (John 3:11).

That these tongues of fire “came to rest on each of them” (Acts 1:3) is important. In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit rested on certain individuals for certain tasks and He rested on the nation of Israel as a whole. Now, under the new covenant, the Holy Spirit rests on, and indwells, each and every believer.

The third sign of the Holy Spirit’s coming was that they all “began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:4). To say there is much controversy within Christianity surrounding this verse is an understatement. My intention is not to answer the question, “Does the gift of tongues² still exist?” No matter what a person’s understanding of the gift of tongues Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians 13 and 14, most Bible teachers (both charismatic and non-charismatic) agree that on Pentecost, Jesus’ disciples were given the ability to speak in other languages. This is made clear in the proceeding verses.

In Jerusalem—within ear shot of the upstairs room the 120 disciples were in—Jews from every nation walked around. They heard the sound of the “violent wind” and when they rushed to see what had happened, they were amazed because each

one heard his own language (at least 15 different nationalities and languages) being spoken at once (Acts 2:5-11).

What did they hear? They heard the 120 in the upper room, “declaring the wonders of God” (Acts 2:11). In other words, when they heard and saw believers worshiping God, they were drawn to the God they were worshiping, and they asked, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12). Whatever your view on the gift of tongues, one thing is clear, the primary purpose of tongues was not to proclaim the gospel, or to authenticate the gospel message (though they may have done both). *The primary purpose of the gift of tongues was praising and worshiping God!*

Also, notice the power of true worship. True worship draws people to God. True worship is evangelistic! When a “not-yet believer” sees a believer experiencing God through worship, the “not-yet believer” is drawn to the God the believer is experiencing. I dream of the day when people fill this auditorium, and from the moment they come in they immediately feel the overwhelming presence of God. I dream of a day when our worship becomes expressive and evangelistic. I dream of the day when we are known as the church that understands what it means to worship God in spirit and in truth.

In response to the crowd’s curiosity about what had happened in the upper room, Peter preached the first gospel message (Acts 2:14-41). Peter’s message was clear and concise, bringing conviction on the hearts of the hearers. Peter proclaimed, “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

Jesus promised when the Holy Spirit came that they would witness in power (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit came, Peter challenged the people, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). The people accepted the challenge, and in one day the church grew from 120 to 3120 (Acts 2:41). Jesus promised when the Holy

Spirit came, His followers would do even greater things than He did (John 14:12). In one day, after one worship service, the disciples reached more people than Jesus did in His entire life on earth.

The Meaning and Significance of Pentecost

You're thinking, *that's a neat story, but so what? Pentecost was unique. Things like that don't happen anymore. What difference does Acts chapter two make in my life?*

The meaning and significance of Pentecost is that now the Holy Spirit has come, and He is now available to every believer. As believers, you and I can have the same Pentecostal power the 120 had. That's right, though it has been almost 2000 years since Pentecost, the Holy Spirit's power has not diminished one iota. Peter said, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). Lloyd Ogilvie, a Presbyterian pastor who served as the chaplain for the United States Senate, said, "The greatest need in the church today is for contemporary Pentecost."³ Vance Havner said, "We are not going to move this world by criticism of it nor conformity to it, but by the combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God."⁴

The greatest need in our church is for Christians to awaken from their slumber, and realize Christianity is not a cultural tradition, but a living, dynamic, personal, relevant relationship with Almighty God. The greatest need in our church is for Christians to awaken from their slumber, and recognize that the Holy Spirit wants to transform them into the image of Christ and fill them with His Power, Presence, and Person. The greatest need in our church is for Christians to awaken from their slumber and experience their own Pentecost—the day when the Holy Spirit becomes alive and real in your life.

How? How can I experience Pentecost in my life? There are no magic formulas, but you can follow the example of the first believers. There are four things I see the believers in Acts did that you and I can do.

1. **Pray.**

God always asks us to start by praying. After Jesus left, the disciples gathered and spent ten days in prayer. How important is prayer in your life? Can you spend ten minutes in concentrated, focused prayer? In order to experience the power of Pentecost, you must spend significant time in prayer.

2. **Wait and Listen.**

The disciples gathered in an upstairs room, where they prayed, and where they waited and listened. Waiting is the hardest thing in the world to do. The second hardest thing to do is listening. Too many times we pray, and if God doesn't answer quickly, we forget what we prayed. Too many times we pray, and then our lives get so crowded with the noises of the world we don't hear when God does speak. Isaiah said, "But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31, NKJV⁵). If you desire to experience the power of Pentecost in your life, you must spend time waiting on, and listening to, God.

3. **Obey.**

It would have been easy for the disciples to return to their former lives after Jesus departed. But they didn't. Jesus told them to go to Jerusalem and wait, and they obeyed (Acts 1:4-13). Then, when the Holy Spirit did come, they were not afraid of what others would think, and neither were they afraid of being made fun of and mocked at (both of which happened, cf. Acts 2:13). Instead they prayed, waited, listened, and obeyed.

I am afraid many Christians never experience the fullness of God in their lives because they live in disobedience to the Spirit. If you have been praying for God to use you, would you be willing to give up your job, uproot your family, and move to follow Him? What would you be willing to give up to follow God? What would you not be willing to give up to follow God?

If you have been praying for God to show you what you can do for Him, are you willing to do the thankless task? Are you willing to do what needs to be done now, until God shows you what can be done later? Many pray, wait, and listen, but few obey. In order to experience Pentecostal power you must be obedient to the Holy Spirit.

4. Witness.

God never intended for you to keep your faith to yourself. The very purpose of the Holy Spirit was to give you power to witness (Acts 1:8). Nothing grieves the Holy Spirit like a child of God who does not share his faith with others.

When was the last time you told someone about Jesus? When was the last time you told someone what Christ has done for you? In order to experience Pentecostal power you must witness, sharing your faith with others.

CONCLUSION

The greatest gift God gave the human race was Jesus Christ. Without Jesus there would be no hope. However, the greatest gift God gave believers was the Holy Spirit. Not accepting God's gift of the Holy Spirit is just as foolish as not accepting God's gift of Jesus Christ. Right now, both gifts are available to any who wish to receive. Through faith in Jesus Christ your sins can be forgiven and you can be given a new life. You can pray, "Dear Jesus, I admit I am a sinner. Forgive me of my sins. I believe You are the Son of God, and I commit my life to You."

By opening yourself up to the work of the Holy Spirit your faith can be strengthened, and you can receive power to live each day. You can pray, "Holy Spirit, I believe in You. Take all of me there is to have. Fill me with Your power and presence. Fill me with Your Spirit. Transform me into the image of Christ."

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was made available to all believers. Have you experienced your Day of Pentecost?

¹ The Hebrew word is *ruah*, and the Greek word is *pneuma* (from where we get our word "pneumonia").

² A better translation, and one that does not carry negative connotations in many people's mind, would be "spiritual language."

³ Lloyd Ogilvie, *The Communicator's Commentary*. "Acts" (57).

⁴ Original source for this quote is unknown.

⁵ New King James Version.