

The Unfolding | A Journey Through Acts

Week 2: A New Nation, Part 1

Text: Acts 2:1-11

September 14, 2014

Text

1 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."

Pray

Recommended Books

- Simply Jesus by N.T. Wright - Getting into the mind of a first-century Jew
- The Mission Of God's People by Christopher Wright - Seeing the overall story of God's word (mission)

The 12th Man

Acts 1 ends with 11 remaining Apostles electing a replacement for Judas the Betrayer. Peter, the de facto leader of the disciples (note that he is often named first among the 12 throughout the gospels) draws from two **Psalms, 69 and 109**, written almost a thousand years earlier, which foretell the betrayal of an innocent man (the Messiah) by an ally who turns out to be evil (Judas). These Psalms also instruct that his office not be left **vacant**. So the Apostles set apart two of the most qualified disciples outside the 12 named Justus and Matthias. Probably at an impasse, and in order to ensure they got this right - because a lot is riding on this selection, they utilized a common practice called casting lots, trusting that God would providentially fill the vacant office with the right person. They likely placed two stones in a pot and shook them out to determine who got the nod to become the 12th Apostle.¹

But why 12? Why not just ordain both of them? These men took seriously the promise God made to **Abraham** that his family - his 12 grandsons whose descendants became the 12 tribes of Israel - would be the instrument God would use to spread his blessings to the rest of the families (or ethnic groups) of the earth as stated in **Genesis 12:2-3**. This was no primitive or superstitious practice. They believed that Jesus himself selected the right man for this position, so Matthias was appointed. On a side note, at no other time was this practice used or recommended to select a church leader, which lets us know that there's a lot more going on here than finding another "associate pastor" to do some of the work. These men represented the 12 tribes of Israel that would bring the good news of the kingdom of God to the far reaches of the earth, fulfilling God's promise to Abraham.

¹ ESV Study Bible. Footnote on Acts 1:26.

To Understand Pentecost We Need To Go Back To The Exodus...

Allow me to share a few words about the Jewish feasts of Passover and Pentecost that will help us better grasp the events of Acts 2.

If you know your Bible, think back to the **Exodus**. Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for 4 centuries. Miraculously, God sent 10 plagues upon the Egyptians, which broke Pharaoh's will, forcing him to grant the Israelites their freedom. The final plague is what pushed them over the top. God commanded Moses to tell the Israelite families to each kill a lamb without blemish. (You can read about this in Exodus 12.) They were to take the **blood of a lamb** and paint the door frames of their dwellings. Then they were to eat the flesh of the lamb that evening. God told Moses that during the night, he would pass through the land of Egypt striking down the first born male of every family, even the first born male among the herds, except for those households that had the blood of the lamb smeared on their door frames. God said he would pass over those homes, hence the term, "Passover." This became the **central holiday** (or feast or memorial) for the nation of Israel. It was effectively their Independence Day. But that doesn't really do it justice because their holidays were both highly patriotic and deeply religious. So imagine a holiday in America that both stirred patriotic sentiment like July 4th or September 11th, yet also captured the God-centered sacredness of Easter Sunday or Good Friday. That's sort of what the Passover felt like to the Jews.

As we read along in the Book of Exodus, the story becomes more and more familiar. The Israelites are high-tailing it out of Egypt, but are devastated to discover that pride-hardened Pharaoh is relentlessly pursuing them along with his armies. The Israelites are stopped in their tracks at the massive Red Sea which blocks their advance. Then, God miraculously parts the sea, creating safe passage for them. As the Egyptians pursue them on the newly dried bed of the Red Sea, God closes the sea on them, drowning them all. God was taking the Israelites somewhere and he was going to make sure they arrived.

So **50 days** into this journey from the first Passover, Israel, guided by God himself, arrived at the foot of **Mount Sinai**. It's here that God calls Moses to *ascend* the mountain and it's here that God gave him the Ten Commandments. **The Law. (Think Constitution.)** Here's what God declares to Moses in **Exodus 19:4-6**: *"You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."* It's here that in giving Moses the Law, God organizes and consecrates Israel as own possession. He wasn't just setting them free to fend for themselves. He claimed them as **his own possession, a holy nation** set apart for him. Then, Moses *descends* the mountain to deliver the Law to Israel.

Connection To The Upper Room

It's impossible to overlook the connection between this event and that of Acts 2. Moses ascended the cloud-covered mountain. Jesus ascended into the clouds. Moses descended with the Law. Jesus sent his Spirit down to write his law on our hearts! The ancients foretold this event. The prophet **Jeremiah**, for instance, says these words in chapter 31, verse 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."* Jeremiah is dreaming of the day when all of God's people will be filled with the Spirit, when their dead, rebellious hearts will be revived, and they will grow in godliness as his distinctive community!

Later on, Peter, in writing to a group of Christians - both Jew and Gentile, says these words in **1 Peter 2:9-10** that echoes God's words to Moses: *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not*

received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” The connection is unmistakable. 50-days after Jesus’ sacrifice and resurrection, Passover gave way to Pentecost. The same way that God formed a new community at Mount Sinai, he formed a new community on Mount Zion (Jerusalem)!

First Fruits

Pentecost not only marked the founding of God’s people, it also marked the **harvest**. Remember that Israel was an agricultural community. It was at Pentecost that the Israelites , under God's command, *“brought the first sheaf of wheat from the crop, and offered it to God, partly as a sign of gratitude and partly as a prayer that all the rest of the crop, too, would be safely gathered in.”*² Think about that text that Linda read. When the day of Pentecost had come, the Spirit infiltrated the room in which the 120 disciples were gathered. And when the Spirit came, the 120 were swept up into his presence, becoming the **first fruits of a new kind of people**. The scriptures go on to say that in response to Peter’s sermon, the thousands of listeners were *“cut to the heart”* (assumedly by the Holy Spirit!), asking what they must do to be saved. And on that day, 3000 came to Christ. The 120 were truly the first fruits of a world-wide harvest!

The New Temple

The Spirit caused **flames of fire** to appear above each of their heads. Just how would a Jewish person have reacted to this sight? To a Jew, the flame was one-and-the-same as the presence of God. In the Old Testament, the Lord led the Jews away from Egypt by a massive pillar of fire. God descended on Mount Sinai in fire, covering its peak in smoke. A fire appeared above the tabernacle that Moses had built. At the dedication of Solomon’s temple, fire came down from heaven and consumed the sacrifice. Fire was the distinctive mark of **God’s holy presence**. And the flames of fire atop the heads of the 120 signaled that they were now the dwelling place of the Most High God. They had become God’s dwelling place. Because of their faith in Jesus, God now declared that they were holy to him. *We are holy to him*. The message? All who lean with the full

² Wright, N.T. Acts For Everyone. Part 1. 20.

weight of their lives on Jesus, trusting in him alone, are made worthy by God to be his holy dwelling place.

A New Covenant - Peter's Explanation

As we read further in Acts 2, the Apostle Peter preaches a sermon explaining what is happening here amongst the 120. Remember, the Spirit came upon them and they all proceeded to speak in **different languages** - the languages of all the pilgrims visiting Jerusalem to observe Pentecost; pilgrims from parts of Europe, Asia, and North Africa. They were speaking coherently, in intelligible languages, about the *"the mighty works of God"* (vs. 11). These outsiders were absolutely befuddled. **Galilee** wasn't a region known for its multiculturalism or intellectual elites. What are the chances a crowd of Galileans were fluent in so many diverse languages? Imagine walking into a Waffle House in small town America and being confronted with a group of locals speaking in Farsi, Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish, Italian, and Greek. Needless to say, it was an unusual sight.

Here's what's interesting about Peter's interpretation in **Acts 2:17-18** - he quotes the prophet Joel saying, *"17 And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; 18 even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy."*

Notice what Peter is saying the 120 were doing. They were **prophesying**. But they weren't telling people about the future. They were simply praising God! (Food-for-thought there! Maybe we need to broaden our understanding of prophecy.). We're all called to *"earnestly desire"* to prophecy, Paul says! (1 Cor. 14:1)

Peter goes on to say that all this praising God amongst the 120 in these various languages fulfills Joel's prophecy about the coming of the Spirit (and, I would argue, *all* the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Spirit). What's distinctive about

the coming of the Spirit is that In the Old Covenant days only a few were empowered by the Spirit. In the New Covenant, all are empowered by the Spirit! "All flesh." This is why he poetically says that all will prophesy, all will see visions, and all will dream spiritually-inspired dreams. Even the servant class, not often viewed as equals in the ancient world, will be endued with God's power ("*male servants and female servants,*" vs. 18).

Do you see *the unfolding* story in Acts 1 and 2?

- *Jesus commissions the whole church to take the gospel global in 1:8;*
- *The entire church (not just the leadership) praised God in numerous languages, leading to the salvation of thousands.*

God was framing The primary purpose of the church: To expand God's rule in people's lives all over the earth, which can only be accomplished through total dependance on the Holy Spirit.

- We have to ask if this matches our expectations of the Holy Spirit.
- It's his job to turn you into a missionary. First, we must give ourselves to him.
- This strikes at the heart of one of the church's biggest sins today: self-sufficiency.
- We must stop compartmentalizing devotional Christianity from missional Christianity.

The Lord's Supper