

April 28, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

What Does This Mean?

Acts 2:1 – 13

Last week we looked what the disciples were doing after Jesus left them on the Mount of Olives and understood from the text that they were waiting in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father. In verse 5 Luke records that Jesus told them that the promise meant that: *you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.*" Acts 1:5 And then He says that: *you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,* Acts 1:8 So we understand that they were not waiting for salvation – but an outpouring of extraordinary power by the Holy Spirit. We saw in the twentieth chapter of John's gospel that they had already received the Holy Spirit by virtue of Jesus breathing on them and saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'; so what they were anticipating was something beyond the power of the Holy Spirit in new birth and gradual sanctification. They were waiting, as Luke says in his gospel – 'to be clothed with power from on high'.

But this was not a passive sort of waiting – they didn't lay around wondering when this would hit. Luke tells us that they were constantly in prayer. They were persevering in prayer – they were steadfastly attentive to prayer – they were devoting themselves to prayer. There were corporate prayers and private prayers – there was public prayer in the temple and private prayer in the upper room. From the time Jesus left them standing on the Mount of Olives to the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, the followers of Jesus, about 120 at this time, were giving themselves for the purpose of prayer to be clothed with power from on high. This promise that the disciples would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them was a promise given to empower world missions and all the ministry that supports it. The context of both texts makes that clear: *you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,* and *you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*

And because the task is not yet complete, I think we should conclude that the promise of this extraordinary power to proclaim the gospel and carry on the work is still valid in our day. Which means that we should be devoting ourselves to this kind of prayer – that God would pour out His Spirit on His church again – as He has done repeatedly throughout 2,000 years of church history – so that our proclamation of His gospel would be filled with conviction, courage and conversions. I believe we need this. I believe we need to pray for this. I believe what C.H. Spurgeon once said: *"No matter what level of spiritual maturity we are on, we need renewed appearances, fresh manifestations, new visitations from on high...I commend you to be seeking God's second appearances. We should be crying to God most pleadingly that He would speak to us a second time. We do not need a reconversion, as some assert...but we do need the windows of heaven to be opened again and again over our heads."* C.H. Spurgeon

From time to time, God has moved in extraordinary ways in the history of the church, and visited His people with extraordinary outpourings of the Holy Spirit in fresh, new, uncustomary and dramatic ways, and we call these revivals. And the main effect of every revival has been to call the lost from darkness to light, to bring conviction and salvation to sinners. Here in Acts, on the day of Pentecost, was the first of those outpourings, and until the task of world evangelization is done and Jesus returns, I believe it is our duty and privilege to pray for seasons of the extraordinary working of the Holy Spirit.

When the Spirit of God is poured out on His people it causes them to say, as these men said in verse 12: *"What does this mean?"* And that's a great question – one we should ask – what does it mean when the Holy Spirit is poured out in power on His people? What are we to make of it? How should we understand this? And I think the text today gives us three things we need to understand. When the Holy Spirit is poured out, first there is the **appearance of the sovereign manifest presence of God**. A sense that the God who sits enthroned in heaven has somehow drawn near to us. Secondly there is the **declaration of the mighty works of God** – or more literally the greatness, the excellence, the magnificence of God. Or to say it another way, a declaration of all the goodness of God. And thirdly, there is the **proclamation of the gospel to the nations**.

First of all, when the Holy Spirit is poured out on these believers, there is the appearance **of the sovereign manifest presence of God** among them. I say **sovereign** first of all because the text says 'suddenly'. 'Suddenly' tells us that this outpouring of the Holy Spirit that day on Pentecost and ever after, is a free and sovereign work of the Holy Spirit and not bound to time and technique. As believers we can count on His daily indwelling presence and grace; we can walk in the obedience of faith and pray earnestly and devotedly for the power from on high. But we cannot make the Spirit come. When He comes, He comes suddenly, surprisingly – at His own time and in His own way. He is not a genie to be summoned to grant our wishes.

And I say the **manifest** presence of God because look at what happened in that room that day. *When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them.* Acts 2:1-3 Notice that there were two things – the sound of a mighty rushing wind, and tongues of fire. Both are phenomenon associated with the manifest presence of God in the Old Testament. When God shows up in power, there is always wind or fire, and sometimes both. When God appeared to Moses He appeared as a burning bush; when He delivered the Israelites there was a strong east wind that parted the Red Sea; when He came down on Mt Sinai, it says He descended in fire; and to Job He speaks out of the whirlwind.

To these guys steeped in the Old Testament, this must have been conclusive evidence that God was near. Tongues as of fire and the sound of wind. At these seasons of outpouring, the Holy Spirit makes Himself known with supernatural power. Tom White, a psychiatrist and missionary wrote of his experience of this manifest presence: *On one occasion it was as I prayed with the elders and deacons in my home...suddenly I saw in front of me a column of flame of about two feet in width. It seemed to arise from beneath the floor and to pass through the ceiling of the room. I knew—without being told—knew by some infallible kind of knowing that transcended the use of my intellect, that I was in the presence of the God of holiness. In stunned amazement I watched a rising column of flames in our own living room, . . . I felt that I was in the presence of reality and...Garbled words of love and of worship tumbled out of my mouth as I struggled to hang on to my self-control. I was no longer trying to worship; worship was undoing me, pulling me apart. And to be pulled apart was both terrifying and full of glory.* (When the Spirit Comes with Power , p. 87-88)

The second thing about this outpouring is **the declaration of the mighty works of God**. That is, when people are gripped by this power of God, what comes out is the declaration of the greatness, the goodness, the excellence, the magnificence of God. When this Pentecost happened, when the Holy Spirit was poured out, all of a sudden you had these 120 people standing up and declaring the mighty works of God, or literally, declaring all the greatness and goodness of God in all kinds of languages. The effect of God showing up in power is the declaration of who He is. If that doesn't happen, you can be sure the power you see is not from God.

There are two aspects to Pentecost that we need to understand here. The first is that on the one hand, the Feast of Pentecost looked back to Mt Sinai and the giving of the Law. Where God descends on the mountain to declare His name. On the Feast of Pentecost, the Jews looked back to the time shortly after they had come out of Egypt, which was the first Passover, and then found themselves camped at the foot of Mt Sinai. God shows up there, descending on the mountain in fire and manifests His presence there. And Moses' prayer is that the Lord would show him His glory. And the Lord says, 'I'll show you My glory, *"I will make all My goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you My name 'The LORD.'* Exodus 33:19 'I'll show you My glory by declaring My name, by declaring who I am.'

And then it says, *The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."* Exodus 34:6-7 The expression of God's manifest presence comes with the declaration of **all** His goodness, the declaration of **all** of who He is. All the greatness, all the excellence, all the magnificence of Him. And you might be tempted to think, 'I like that first part – merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping a steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin – I like that part – that's good'. But what about 'by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children' and so on? What's good about that? How do we see the goodness of God in that?

We cannot forget, that though God is our Father, He is also Judge of all the earth. And the thing you want in a judge is goodness – you want a good judge, a just judge. If I'm hauled in to stand before a judge – I'd to know this guy is a good judge – a just judge. What would we say about a judge who let a murderer go free? All the evidence is in, the guy is guilty, and the judge says, 'O that's all right, we all make mistakes' and let's the guy off the hook? We'd say that's not a good judge. There's no justice there. That's not good. The goodness of God consists in His abounding, far-reaching love and grace, and in His eternal justice in not winking at sin. If He just expresses His steadfast love without taking care of sin, He wouldn't be good – if He just came down hard on sin but didn't express His love – He'd be terrifying but He wouldn't be good. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit causes us to declare **all** His goodness.

I can hear some of those disciples on that first Pentecost quoting this passage of Scripture in some language – '*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty...*' What happens when the Holy Spirit comes in power is that you are overwhelmed with the greatness of God. It is as though the flames that burned over their heads set fire to their knowledge **of** God and turned it into a fiery passion **for** God. Wherever and whenever the Holy Spirit is poured out in the hearts of men, what we see is the declaration of the greatness, the goodness, the excellence, the magnificence of God. Being filled with the Spirit means that you are filled with the truth of who God is – God comes and declares His name.

When the Spirit of God is poured out He shows you Jesus, and you begin to say, 'O the cross – where His blood was shed for me. The cross, where the Father's eternal love is displayed and His wrath against sin is satisfied. Oh, the goodness of God!' When the Spirit of God is poured out you see at the same time, the awful, wretchedness of your sin, and the awesome redeeming love of God. **You see all the goodness of God.** There is a deep conviction in your soul that, 'I was utterly lost, and now by the grace of God, eternally found!' And this message goes out to the world with conversion power.

Because when the Holy Spirit comes in power, there is **the proclamation of the gospel to the nations.** The second aspect of Pentecost goes back to Exodus 23:16 where the Lord commanded the people to keep the Feast of Harvest, or as it was also known, the **Feast of Weeks**. Fifty days, or seven full weeks, after Passover, they were to appear before the Lord with the firstfruits of their harvest, and worship God. The Jews believe that this was because seven weeks had elapsed between their coming out of Egypt, the first Passover, and their arrival at Mt. Sinai. How significant, and not just coincidental, that 3,000 people were harvested for God and given eternal life on the day of Pentecost, the feast of harvest.

It is unfortunate that Pentecostal power has for many people been associated mainly with speaking in tongues. But if you look at this passage, what you don't see highlighted is tongue-speaking, but rather the proclamation of the gospel and the harvest of souls. Pentecost has been hijacked by those who have confused the means with the end. Tongues were never meant to be sought after as just another step in the Christians experience, but were intended as a means to express and display the glory and wonder of a God who saves. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians that tongues are a sign, not to believers, but unbelievers. The fact that the disciples spoke of the glory of God in several different languages serves to emphasize the fact that speaking in tongues promotes the proclamation of the gospel, not the phenomenon itself.

In other words, the miracle of tongues was a demonstration of God's sovereign power, and it showed that this power promised in chapter one was for the proclamation of the gospel to the ends of the earth. That is further illustrated by the table of nations Luke presents in this passage: *Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians.* And you have to ask yourself, why does Luke go into such detail here about the nations? Why is it important that we know who was in the crowd? And one of the answers is that this fulfills the prophecy in Joel that says that the Holy Spirit in the last days will be poured out on all flesh.

But the other answer is found way back in Genesis. The first mention of the table of nations is in Genesis ten; and then in chapter eleven we hear about the tower of Babel that these nations attempted to build. They wanted to be their own masters and make a name for themselves and build their own way to heaven. And the text tells us that God came down in the middle of that rebellion and confused their tongues. Their tongues were confused – suddenly nobody could understand anybody else. There was just a lot of babbling going on. And the nations were divided and became strangers and even hostile to each other. And from that day to this, unregenerate people have this inborn racism, and cultural elitism, and these ethnocentric views that divide nations and people and cause wars and strife and struggle.

And just like when God came down on Mt Sinai and created a new people through the covenant of the Law, at Pentecost God comes down, through the Holy Spirit and creates a new people through the covenant of grace, where racial and cultural barriers are removed because for the first time language and culture are not barriers to peace. This first public worship service was conducted in not just one language – but all the languages, not just one culture, but all the cultures. ***When the Holy Spirit was poured out, the curse of Babel was reversed.*** By virtue of Christ's death on the cross and resurrection to life, *He created in Himself, one new man. A new creation, Where there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* Galatians 3:28

So the answer to the question: What does this mean? is just this: When the Spirit of God is poured out, there is an overpowering appearance of the manifest presence of God; there is the spontaneous declaration of His greatness and power; and there is the effective proclamation of the gospel. When the Spirit of God came down, the disciples were not saying, 'Finally I have peace and joy in my life. Finally I have healing in my body. Finally I have power to overcome my addictions'. They're not talking about power, they're not marveling at their sudden ability to speak in different languages, they're not talking about gifts – they are reveling in His presence, proclaiming the greatness and goodness of God. They're talking about His steadfast love and His eternal justice. They're declaring the gospel message of the cross where *Lovingkindness and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.* Psalm 85:1 In every instance of recorded history where we read about the awesome power of God being poured out by the Holy Spirit, we also read of hundreds and thousands brought to Christ.

In the late 18th century, James MacGready, pastor of the Red River congregation in Logan County, Kentucky, enlisted the help of interceding Christians who would sign a covenant of prayer. James McCready had a vision for Logan County -- to see it "***transformed by a mighty work of God's Spirit.*** Once people agreed to pray, they covenanted to pray every Saturday evening and Sunday morning for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Logan county. Additionally, they agreed to spend the third Saturday of the month fasting for this. For nearly three years these saints prayed for a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit in their county until the last weekend in July of 1800 when Pastor MacGready announced a series of meetings at the Gaspar River church. Although they were expecting a larger than normal crowd, they were overwhelmed that weekend by over 10,000 people who gathered, and they saw thousands converted as they heard the gospel.

In his covenant of prayer, James MacGready wrote: ***“when we consider the Word and the promises of a compassionate God to the poor lost family of Adam, we find the strongest encouragement for Christians to pray in faith — to ask in the name of Jesus for the conversion of their fellow men ...with these promises before us, we feel encouraged to unite our supplications to a prayer hearing God, for the outpouring of His Spirit, that His people may be quickened and comforted, and that our children, and sinners generally, may be converted”***

Our gracious, heavenly Father,

Open again the windows of heaven and pour out Your Holy Spirit on Your people. We need a renewed appearance, a fresh manifestation, another visitation from on high. All the divine purposes of love and the redemption won by Christ are vain unless Holy Spirit You come in power and give might to the message and regenerate the hearts of men by Your power, giving them eyes to see Jesus and showing them the realities of the unseen world. Fill us with a devotion to prayer, praying until heaven comes down and we are clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit. Manifest Your presence among us so that we might declare Your goodness and the saving power of Jesus to the nations, leading men to repentance and faith for Your glory and Your name's sake, we pray in the saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.