

From Acts 2 to May 23 (Acts 2:17-21)

As we have already noted, today is Pentecost—a day in the church calendar that commemorates the spectacular coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell the early followers of Jesus ten days after his ascension which happened to fall on the day of Pentecost, originally a Jewish harvest celebration which, by the time of the first century, also noted the giving of the Law to Moses. On this day, our thoughts are typically directed to Acts chapter 2 that describes the moment featuring the sound of a mighty wind, the appearance of tongues of fire resting on the heads of the early followers gathered in an upper room, and the amazing gift of languages given to those early followers in that moment so that the initial testimony of the gospel on that day could be understood in the native languages of the various ethnic groups of Jews who had gathered on the basis of the commotion.

In a nutshell, the message they heard that day explained that this event was God's doing in fulfilling an ancient prophecy marking a new era in faith set in motion by the resurrection of Jesus, who, now seated at God's right hand had sent the Holy Spirit to be poured out on all people, as promised, affirming that Jesus, the One who had been largely rejected by them, is, in fact, both Lord and Messiah.

Realizing that they had crucified the One for whom they had hoped, the crowd was cut to the heart, and in desperation they asked, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter immediately replied, "Repent (in other words: change your mind about Jesus), and be baptized in his name for forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." In other words, your hope can still be realized—you can still be included in Christ and receive the promised Holy Spirit. 3000 people took him up on that—a megachurch on day one.

There's a ton of fascinating theological content packed into this account—and we've considered some of this in years past. While it is noteworthy, I don't want to rehearse that information today. Instead I'd like to lead your thought through the implications of this for the lives we lead right now. What is the practical benefit of the indwelling Spirit for Christ followers? Why does it matter? I ask these questions for myself as much as for anyone, because I believe there's a tendency among us to think of the Spirit's work as somewhat mysterious, hidden from view—a sense that the Spirit is working in the background pursuing whatever it is the Spirit does, and that we're largely passive in the process. Perhaps this develops in us especially as we read the account of Pentecost and compare that experience with ours, which is nothing like that—on the one hand it can make us feel like we're a flip-phone Christian in a Smartphone faith. On the other hand we might conclude that the commotion of that Pentecost day was fine for the apostles and early believers, but what does it say for us? How do we get from Acts 2 to May 23, 2021?

We begin that journey by shifting our focus from what happened on Pentecost to why it happened. Days before Jesus had told the disciples to wait for the gift his Father promised, and he followed that up by saying they would receive power when the Holy Spirit arrived. As we noted earlier, that moment would mark a new era of faith, a time towards which their history had pointed in the prophecy of Joel when the Spirit would be poured out on all people, a remarkable feature since previous to this only a few persons had experienced the Spirit's presence in their life. But why they received the Spirit, and how the Spirit enabled them provides insight into the Spirit's practical benefit to us.

The Hebrew scriptures associate the Spirit with power, purpose, and the immediate presence of God. The Spirit is creative and life-giving according to Job 33:4, life-sustaining according to Ps. 104:30, and personally interactive according to Ps. 139, a being, a distinguishable entity with thought, will, and purpose, equal to and comprised of all that Scripture describes as belonging to God. In Hebrew history, the Spirit resided in specific people providing them God's power to accomplish God's purpose. Power in his sense pertains more to ability—a divinely assisted ability rather than just a display of raw power. We see this in rulers: Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, and they had the ability to align themselves and others under the rule of God to serve the plan of God for their moment in history. Judges received the Spirit, for similar reasons but additionally power to rescue God's people in seasons of peril, like

Gideon and Jephthah. Craftsmen were given the Spirit—Bezalel and Oholiab, who acted as general contractors for the construction of the Tabernacle and its furnishings were given abilities in service of God's purpose. Prophets, like Elijah, Isaiah, Daniel, by the Spirit served as mouthpieces for God calling people to faithfulness and purpose. The Spirit conveyed God's presence, and that presence was often described as "The Lord is with you." We find, even in a brief reflection, that the Spirit isn't an afterthought in faith's journey, but central to it, and essential for it. The Spirit isn't merely a force, but a relational presence interactive with humanity with specific intent.

So now we flash forward to Pentecost to find the Spirit coming to reside in Christ followers providing divine assistance enabling them to continue Jesus' work of announcing and giving evidence for the reality of God's reign on earth. The grand reunion of God's presence in the heart and life of human beings is underway made possible by the defeat of sin on the cross of Christ, meaning that it is now possible for humankind to slip the grip of sin's destructive work on the soul and gain the grip of the Spirit's life-giving transformation of the soul. More than this, though, we are enabled to partner with God in the work of reclaiming creation by the Spirit who prompts, equips, and empowers us in that effort.

How do we get to that place where the reasons for Acts 2 connect to us on May 23? Two ideas help us get there: the first involves another shift in perspective, the second an act of will. Briefly, the shift involves a change of thought from I have the Holy Spirit, to the Holy Spirit has me. It's a simple but profound shift. When we think of ourselves as having the Holy Spirit, a subtle implication gives us the sense that the Holy Spirit is present within us for our benefit and use when we think we need the Spirit. In so doing, we can fail to grasp the larger horizon of the Spirit's work in the world. Think instead of being engulfed by the Spirit, where you are drawn up into the life and energy of the Spirit who pervades every part of your being, your mind, your character, your actions leading each component of your being into alignment with the heart of God. Making yourself available to that work of the Spirit will transform you to the place where you bring the presence of Christ everywhere you are—and you likely will be unaware of the impact that has, but the Spirit knows, and so do those you're with. A kind word or a gentle act in a challenging moment not only symbolizes the grace of Christ, it enacts the grace—it creates the reality. When you hug a lonely or desperate person in the name of Christ, that person experiences the personal hug of Christ. When you give a word of encouragement, it is Christ himself encouraging. When you smile at a stranger you pass in your day, the face of Christ is turned towards them. You engulfed in the Spirit convey the blessing and presence of Christ in every moment of your day and for every situation in which you are engaged. The most Spirit filled person is the one most like Christ who is oriented towards love—the well-being of others—in every encounter. Consider the impact for good in the world as the presence of Christ is inescapably present in his countless followers living out what Paul in Galatians states as the only thing that counts: faith expressing itself in love.

The second idea is the act of will—which itself is the ability to choose. The act of will that moves God's plan forward through Christ followers is obedience, meaning simply agreeing with God and responding accordingly. Spirit enabled ability is realized in the response of obedience. Think back to another dramatic demonstration of this that comes from the life of Peter. In a storm tossed boat on the sea of Galilee, Peter and the other disciples saw Jesus walking towards them on the water. To verify that it was Jesus and not a ghost, Peter said, "Lord, If it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." Jesus said, "Come." Obviously, walking on water is beyond natural human capability—Peter knew this, so did the others, so did Jesus. But in obedience to Christ, Peter clambered over the side of the boat, and found support on the water—he did the walking, eyes on Christ, what he could do, and Christ provided the support, what he could do. As long as that connection remained, Peter experienced power to do beyond what he was capable of. But the reality of that experience only developed at the point of obedience. I'm not suggesting that you head out to Lake Washington later today and try this out for yourself. If Jesus tells you to get out of the boat, then do so. Otherwise, you better know how to swim. The reality of that experience for Peter and the other disciples was an illustration of how obedience to Christ in the course of all things will prevail and permit you

to accomplish far more than is possible in your own capability. As Dallas Willard put it: you know the Spirit is involved when the outcome is incommensurate with your ability. For us, the Spirit is like Jesus on the water—the Spirit says, Come, do this, be here, draw close to that person, engage in that situation, take up that cause, respond in this way, live in this manner, and perhaps in our estimation, we deem ourselves incapable of what the Spirit says. But friends, the power presents in our obedience, our agreement with the Spirit of God.

Let's celebrate Pentecost by being people filled with Christ's Spirit, conveying his presence, and in obedience to the Spirit's lead finding power to change the world. AMEN