



# Bible Study

## Acts 2:1-21

### Pentecost

#### INTRODUCTION

Pentecost is actually the Greek name for a festival known in the Old Testament (OT) as the ‘Feast of Weeks’ (see Leviticus 23:15; Deuteronomy 16:9). The Greek word means ‘fifty’ and refers to the fifty days that have elapsed since Passover. The Feast of Weeks celebrated the end of the grain harvest. Interestingly it is referred to in Joel prophecy (Joel 2:8-32).

#### PENTECOST

In the forty days after the resurrection, Jesus had continued to appear to his disciples. During that time, he reaffirmed the promise that he would not leave them by themselves. He said:

*“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)*

Having made the promise, Jesus departed from them and ascended into heaven. So, for ten days the disciples waited.

On the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were gathered together in one place when suddenly there was a sound like the rush of a violent wind and then tongues of fire descended upon them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.

William Willimon wrote this about the Day of Pentecost experience:

*‘More than one interpretation can be offered for what happened in the upper room at Pentecost. No single formulation can do it justice. We are listening to the account of something strange, beyond the bounds of imagination, miraculous, inscrutable, an origin which, as far as Luke is concerned, was the only way one could ‘explain’ the existence of the church.’*

When we read the first chapter of Genesis, it says the wind (breath) of God swept over the waters at creation. When Moses went up Mt. Sinai to meet God and receive the Ten Commandments, the mountain was covered with smoke and fire (Exodus 19:16-18). The wind and fire were signs of the presence of God.

This was not the first time that the Holy Spirit had filled a person with power. In the days of the OT prophets, the Holy Spirit would empower their work. However, in those days the Spirit was particular – some were filled, others not. The empowerment of the Holy Spirit was rare. In fact, it was said that it had been many years since God had raised up a prophet.

On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was universal – all received the power of the Spirit. This was a whole new thing as no one was passed over. This was God’s ‘new’ creation – the Holy Spirit was poured out on all, filling all, and empowering all.

H. Stephen Shoemaker describes it this way:

*‘The Spirit of God that moved across the face of the deep and created the heavens and the earth, that overshadowed Mary’s flesh and brought forth Jesus, that descended upon Jesus at his baptism, announcing his sonship and anointing his mission, now let itself loose upon the church.’*

#### WHO WAS PRESENT THERE?

Quite a few ethnic groups are mentioned (Acts 2:9-11). Thomas Long suggests that there is more to this list than just geographic regions.

*‘The conglomeration of people is not only a diverse and pluralistic gathering of tourists; it is also an historically impossible collection of folks. Consider the Medes, for instance. They must have had a rather difficult journey to Jerusalem since they would not only have had to travel several hundred miles, but several hundred years as well. Medes having already disappeared from the canvas of history.’*

Why would Luke have included a people that were no longer around?

What Luke is saying, is that “**every nation under heaven**” was present there. He meant it. The nations mentioned represent the ends of the

earth geographically and historically. The Holy Spirit was transforming all people – past, present and future.

Miraculously, in this diverse gathering, people communicated with one another. This was not, though, like a meeting of the United Nations with folk wearing earphones for simultaneous translations, nor was it like having a Star Trek Universal translator.

The ‘speaking in tongues’ here refers to speaking many different languages, which enabled all these people to understand the message of the apostles.

So, was it the tongues of the speakers that were affected or the ears of the hearers?

Luke doesn’t give us a direct answer – but simply points us to the Holy Spirit who creates this miracle of communication. Kathleen Norris, says quite simply:

*‘The Holy Spirit is a great equalizer.’*

### **POWER**

We clearly see in this story that the power of the Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to do two things:

Firstly, it enabled them to speak. The sermon by Peter which follows this passage is the first of many speeches when the disciples boldly witness to their faith in all sorts of circumstances. As Willimon says:

*‘The Spirit is the power which enables the church to ‘go public’ with its good news, to attract a crowd and . . . to have something to say worth hearing.’*

It has been that way ever since as believers have told and retold the story of Jesus.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit brought togetherness, fellowship and thinking about things in a new way - to see the importance of the common good of the community as more important than individual wants and needs. A community created with hearts of love, devoted to one another, which inspired persons to sacrifice for the larger good – these are marks of new life.

### **REFLECTIONS**

*“When the day of Pentecost had come”* (Acts 2:1). The Spirit arrives in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost is a fulfilment of prophecy and as the answer to the community’s expectant prayers; it is a clear sign of God’s faithfulness.

The Pentecost experience is repeated again in Acts – this shows God’s continuing faithfulness (Acts 8:17; 10:44-11:18; 19:1-6). This wondrous action did not happen just the once, but symbolizes the powerful and effective nature of God’s ongoing presence among those who follow Jesus.

*“They were altogether in one place”* (Acts 2:1). God’s Spirit is poured out on a community of believers. The Holy Spirit is not a ‘personal’ gift from God that each believer privatises. Notice that the same Spirit appeared among them – on each of them as a distinguishing mark of a **people** belonging to God.

*“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages.”* (Acts 2:4) The first miracle of the Holy Spirit is to speak in unknown foreign languages. The dramatic speech is neither ecstatic nor unintelligible; it is a language that communicates to others *‘the wonders of God.’* (Acts 2:11)

*“Are not these who are speaking Galileans?”* (Acts 2:7) The Jews watching were both amazed and perplexed at hearing the Galilean dialect. The language of the Spirit is not communicated in perfect or heavenly diction. It is spoken in the language of the people of all kinds of groups. Spoken in their idiom. God works in collaboration with real people – people who are filled with the Spirit to work on God’s behalf in their own world.

This passage from Acts clearly connects the outpouring of the Spirit with the dynamic power that enables the church to give effective witness to the living Jesus.

