

# “Ripples”

## (New Testament History)

Acts 1:8, 2:1-4, 8:14-17, 10:44-48 <sup>1</sup>

It hadn't even been two months yet, and so much had happened that their lives felt completely upended and inside out. They had come to Jerusalem for Passover, expecting Jesus to somehow take over the government, eject the Roman army of occupation, and install the twelve of them as the cabinet of a renewed Davidic Kingdom . . . but instead Jesus had been arrested and cruelly executed as a common criminal.

They had watched Jesus die, and their hopes with Him . . . but then three days later He rose from death and powerfully demonstrated to them and to many others that He was actually alive. After His resurrection, Jesus had spent about six weeks with them, teaching them about their role in the new realities of the Kingdom of God . . . but then He unexpectedly ascended into heaven in a cloud of glory after telling them to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came.

It had now been nearly two weeks since Jesus ascended, and the disciples and the other believers had gathered to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost (Shavuot), when <sup>2</sup> *suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.* <sup>3</sup> *They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.* <sup>4</sup> *All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them* (Acts 2:2-4).

In order to get some sense of what this was like, try to imagine that Columbia is hosting an international festival such that the town is filled with persons from all over the world. Now try to imagine that we've gathered for worship in this place on the Sunday of the festival while the city is filled with strangers whose native tongues are anything but English.

Suddenly, out of a clear blue sky, we all become aware of the sound of violent wind, louder and more frightening than a tornado. As we look around at each other in shock and fear, trying to decide what to do and where to go, things go from bad to worse. Now the very air seems to be suddenly filled with fire, a conflagration that not only fills the room, but that just as suddenly separates into smaller flames that come to rest on every one of us.

And while we're trying to deal with the shock of all this, things become stranger still. Some of us begin speaking in German, though we don't know how to speak German. Some of us begin speaking in Russian, though we don't know how to speak Russian. Many of us begin speaking in Spanish, though we don't know how to speak Spanish. Some of us begin speaking Lithuanian; some Turkish; some Arabic; some Italian; some Chinese. The room is now filled, not only with wind and fire, but with a cacophony of voices speaking most of the primary languages of the world.

The sound of the wind had been heard all over town, and now a huge crowd is gathering in the street and on the steps as folks from all over who are here for the festival come to see what destruction the wind has wrought. But instead of destruction, what they find is all of us speaking their own native languages. To their bewilderment, they hear us declaring the wonders of God's love in their own tongues. *Amazed and perplexed, they ask one another, "What does this mean?"* (Acts 2:5-12).

It should have been no surprise, I guess. Jesus had clearly told His disciples that *"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 1:8). Yes, Jesus had told them,

---

<sup>1</sup> A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on August 18, 2013.

but they hadn't understood what He meant any more than you and I would have done. They were caught up in their own ideas of greatness and significance, which put them completely off the track of what God intended to do . . . which still happens even today.

It's perhaps unfortunate that we so often speak of the events at Pentecost as "the coming of the Holy Spirit," because the Holy Spirit obviously didn't come into existence on Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost was the "birth of the Spirit" in the same way that the manger event was the "birth of the Son." Both the Son and the Spirit had always existed, without beginning or end, but these "births" did represent the beginnings of significant new chapters in God's eternal plan.

Even before God spoke the Word of Creation, God knew the very moment at which Jesus would eventually be born; and from that same beginning, God planned for Jesus to be crucified at the Feast of the Passover, because that feast symbolized Israel's deliverance from Egypt through the death of the sacrificial Passover lamb.<sup>2</sup>

In the same way, from the very moment of creation, God planned for the Spirit to be given in fullness at Pentecost, because that feast symbolized the firstfruits of the harvest—in this case, the beginning of the harvest of the Eternal Kingdom. Pentecost ushered in the "last days," the period between the coming of the Holy Spirit and the final, triumphant Return of Christ.

Although the Spirit didn't come into existence at Pentecost, something very special did happen then. What happened on that morning was that the Spirit was given in perpetuity to every believer, rather than being given only to particular persons at particular times, as had always been the case before; and from that moment on, the Holy Spirit became the dominant reality in the life of the early church. Even today, God's Spirit continues to take up residence in the life of every person who commits his or her life to Jesus (Romans 8:9).

Jesus spoke of the Spirit as His personal representative (John 14:26) and as His personal gift to all who believe in Him (John 7:39). "*I will ask the Father,*" Jesus told them, "*and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you*" (John 14:16-18).

Now that Pentecost has come and the Spirit has been given, the New Testament tells us that God's Spirit lives within us (1 John 2:27, 4:4), that He helps us and prays for us (Romans 8:26). He reminds us of what Jesus taught, and He teaches us how to follow Jesus (John 14:26).

Our summer journey through the Bible has now brought us to New Testament History, a section made up of just one book, the book of Acts. While some Bibles title Acts "the Acts of the Apostles," the book is really the story of "the Acts of the Holy Spirit." Acts is the story of the spread of the Good News of Jesus in outward ripples from Jerusalem after the Day of Pentecost, and it is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke.

While both Luke and Acts are anonymous, both books have always been attributed to Luke, the Gentile physician who attended Paul and accompanied him on his missionary journeys.<sup>3</sup> It may be that Luke intended to write a third volume that was never completed, since Acts ends abruptly about A.D. 62 and omits several significant events in the final years of Paul's life.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See [www.bethlehemstar.net](http://www.bethlehemstar.net).

<sup>3</sup> Other than three references to Luke in Paul's letters, we know nothing else about him (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24).

<sup>4</sup> *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), p. 2073.

The most distinctive feature in Acts is the speeches or sermons, constituting nearly a third of the total text of Acts. Ten of these are major: three by Peter (2:14–36; 3:11–26; 10:34–43), one by Stephen (7:1–53), and six by Paul. Three of Paul’s are defense speeches in Jerusalem and Caesarea (22:1–21; 24:10–21; 26:1–29). The other three consist of one speech on each of Paul’s missionary journeys, each to a different type of assembly: to Jews on his first journey (13:16–47), to Gentiles on his second (17:22–31), and to Christians on his third (20:18–35). Many shorter testimonies run throughout Acts (e.g., 5:29–32; 14:15–17), and all are primarily a witness to Christ in one form or another. Much of the theological material of Acts is to be found in these speeches.<sup>5</sup>

Following the story line of Acts becomes easy once you realize that the book is structured around a cycle that is repeated several times: (1) Christian leaders preach the gospel; (2) listeners are converted and added to the church; (3) opponents (often Jewish but sometimes Gentile) begin to persecute the Christian leaders; and (4) God intervenes to rescue the leaders or otherwise protect the church.<sup>6</sup>

While there is much drama and many significant events in Acts, it seems to me that we can capture the most fundamental “outbound ripples” in just four passages, beginning with Acts 1:8, where Jesus told His disciples moments before His ascension back to heaven, “*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.*” That verse really summarizes the outline of the book, pointing as it does to three sequential Pentecost experiences.

The first of these Pentecost experiences took place in Jerusalem on what Christians call The Day of Pentecost. This event took place during the great annual Jewish festival known as the Feast of Weeks (Exodus 34:22), when Jerusalem was filled with Jews from all over the world. On that first Pentecost, the disciples and other believers were still in Jerusalem, waiting for the power that Jesus promised when the Spirit came:

*<sup>1</sup> When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. <sup>4</sup> 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).*

When the Jewish festival ended, all those Jews who had heard the Gospel of Jesus preached on The Day of Pentecost returned to their homes around the world, and the Good News went with them. That was wonderful, to be sure, but most of these new Jewish believers would have naturally kept the Good News within the Jewish community. It was beyond all their imagining that God intended the Message to go to all people everywhere.

After the martyrdom of Stephen (one of the first Deacons) some weeks or months later, *a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1).* And now, although it took persecution to accomplish it, the Gospel began to be preached from Jerusalem throughout Judea and Samaria, just as Jesus had said it would be.

When Philip proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah in Samaria, many believed this Good News; and *<sup>14</sup> when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. <sup>15</sup> When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, <sup>16</sup> because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them;*

<sup>5</sup> ESV, pp. 2075-2076.

<sup>6</sup> ESV, p. 2077.

they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>17</sup> Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-17).

You probably know that in those days, the Jews despised the Samaritans, and some special evidence of God's favor seems to have been necessary to assure the Samaritans that they were indeed fully accepted into the new messianic community of the people of God. And the obvious granting of God's Holy Spirit to the Samaritan converts was equally important for the Apostles, proving to them that God's transforming grace had indeed been granted to the Samaritans.

By this unique delay between the **Jewish Pentecost** and the **Samaritan Pentecost**, God demonstrated that in the Body of Christ, where there is neither Jew nor Greek (Galatians 3:28), there is also neither Jew nor Samaritan. These Samaritan converts had already been baptized into the Name of Jesus, but the baptism of the Holy Spirit, normally simultaneous with such faith, was divinely delayed for a specific and wonderful reason. In this holy moment, God was healing a centuries-old division between these neighbors.

Well, now we've seen Acts 1:8 implemented from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and the third and final experience of Pentecost was not long in coming. It was lunchtime, and Peter was praying on the flat roof of the house where he was staying in Joppa while he waited for the meal to be prepared.

You'll remember that as he prayed, Peter had a vision in which God told him, "*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean*" (Acts 10:15), and just as the vision ended, there was a knock at the door. Three men stood there, asking Peter to come and explain the Message of Jesus to their boss, a Roman military commander, and a Gentile. Although Jews normally never went into Gentile homes, even Peter was able to make the connection between the vision and the knock on the door, so he went.

Once he arrived at Cornelius's home, <sup>34</sup> Peter began to speak: "*I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism <sup>35</sup> but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. . . . <sup>43</sup> All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*"

<sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. <sup>45</sup> The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. <sup>46</sup> For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, <sup>47</sup> "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." <sup>48</sup> So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:34-35, 43-48).

This third specific and dramatic granting of the Holy Spirit, the **Gentile Pentecost**, had been delayed for the same strategic reason as the Samaritan Pentecost had been—so that the Apostles would get the message loud and clear that the Message of Jesus was for all people. And the best news, of course, is that it is here and you and I come into the Story, since most of us are Gentiles.

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, those first believers received the power to live, not just "somehow," but *triumphantly*. They received the courage to meet dangerous situations bravely and boldly. They received an unlearned eloquence when the time came to give testimony about their faith. They received an unstoppable joy that was independent of their circumstances. And these gifts should really have been no surprise. After all, Jesus had told them, "*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 1:8).

And so it is that still, today, “we’ve a story to tell to the nations that shall turn their hearts to the right, a story of truth and mercy, a story of peace and light. For the darkness shall turn to dawning, and the dawning to noonday bright, and Christ’s great Kingdom shall come on earth, the Kingdom of love and light”!<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> H. Ernest Nichol, “We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations.”