

Chapter 3: The Firstfruits of a Global Harvest

Acts 2:1–13

In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit was alive and active; however, his ministry was selective and limited. Although the Holy Spirit was instrumental in the Old Testament (as in the New Testament) in opening hearts to believe in the true God for salvation, he did not bring his power to bear on a wide range of people. Mostly, the Holy Spirit's role was limited to the anointed offices of the Old Testament: prophets, priests, and kings. To say that Jesus is the "Christ" is to use the Greek term that means "Anointed One," the equivalent of "Messiah" in Hebrew. Jesus Christ, then, is the ultimate prophet, priest, and king, as the one who was filled with the Holy Spirit beyond measure (John 3:34). In Acts 2, we read of the great work on the Day of Pentecost, when Jesus Christ poured out his Holy Spirit upon his church as a permanent endowment, in order to sanctify his church and to equip his church for ministry to reach the nations. In the first installment of this story, we see that *the nations are ripe for the Holy Spirit's harvest*.

Baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–4)

Although Luke mentions the time of the outpouring of the Spirit almost in passing, the feast of Pentecost is highly significant for understanding the significance of this moment in redemptive history. To begin, it was important that the outpouring of the Spirit took place during one of the high feasts. Commentators especially note how, in the Gospel of John, we regularly see Jesus "going up" to Jerusalem for various feasts (John 2:13; 5:1; 7:10; 10:22–23; 12:1–2). At a very basic level, this ensured that the gathered nation of Israel would be witnesses to what God was doing in their midst through his Son Jesus Christ.¹ Here, during this time, the disciples were "all together in one place" (v. 1b).

The Fulfillment of Pentecost (Acts 2:1)

Yet, Luke suggests that this was more than just a convenient, public moment. What the ESV translates as, "When the day of Pentecost arrived" (v. 1a), conveys something more in the Greek than simply to note the date. More, the word for "arrived" has to do with *fulfillment*, "suggesting the end of a period of preparation and anticipation."² The word Luke uses appears only two other times in the New Testament, both in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 8:23, the word appears to describe how the water was "filling" with water during a great storm, while Jesus slept. Then, in Luke 9:51, the same word appears to describe the approaching completion (i.e., the "filling up") of Jesus' mission on earth:

¹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:73–74.

² Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 131.

“When the days *drew near* for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” As Lenski explains, “The idea is that, by coming, this day is filling up completely a measure of time that was hitherto beginning to be filled more and more.... Luke is thinking of the Lord’s promise and of how it is now coming to fulfillment, the arrival of this day making full the measure of time the Lord contemplated when he made the promise.”³

Further, this is not just any feast, but a specific feast: Pentecost, or the Feast of Weeks. This feast took place “seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering [i.e., during the Feast of Firstfruits]” (Lev. 23:15). The connection to the Feast of Firstfruits is important, where Israelites were commanded to “bring the sheaf of the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest, and he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, so that you may be accepted. On the day after the Sabbath, the priest shall wave it” (Lev. 23:10–11). The Feast of Firstfruits was celebrated immediately after Passover, on the following Sunday (“the day after the Sabbath”; i.e., the day after the Old Testament Sabbath on Saturday). Then, the Feast of Pentecost (also called the “Feast of *Weeks*”) was seven full weeks after that “day after the Sabbath,” on still another Sunday. Christ, then, fulfilled the first two feasts when he became the final and ultimate Passover Lamb to be sacrificed (1 Cor. 5:7), and then when he was raised from the dead on the following Sunday, as “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20, 23).

In the same way, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit “fulfills/fills up” the Old Testament type of the Feast of Pentecost in two major ways. First, several commentators (going back to ancient Judaism) have connected the day of the Feast of Pentecost with the day when the Lord gave the law to his people on Mount Sinai.⁴ As the Lord came down from heaven to his people on Sinai, so now the Lord comes down from heaven to be even nearer to his people by indwelling them by his Spirit.⁵ Further, the great “sound like a mighty rushing wind” (v. 2) may compare to the “very loud trumpet blast” on Sinai (Ex. 19:16, 19).⁶ Most importantly, however, we see a contrast being drawn, as this Pentecost accomplishes what the giving of the law could not. Thus, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit—rather than the terror of the law—will characterize this new administration of God’s covenant of grace with his people (e.g., 2 Cor. 3:6–18).⁷ Thus, the apostles are emboldened rather than cowering in any kind of “fear and trembling,” as at Sinai (Ex. 19:16; 20:18–19).⁸ While a connection to Sinai fits the context well, interpreters are quick to caution that Luke never makes this connection explicit.

Second, there is a stronger connection to the nature of Pentecost as the “day of the firstfruits” (Num. 28:26). This is somewhat confusing, since we must not confuse Pentecost with the *Feast of Firstfruits*, where a wave offering of the firstfruits of the *barley* crop was offered in the early spring,

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 56.

⁴ “In later Judaism it was reckoned to be the anniversary of the giving of the law at Sinai—a reasonable deduction from the chronological note in Ex. 19:1.” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 54.)

⁵ Bock notes the theme of God’s presence, but “not necessarily Sinai, unless one appeals to the general cultural backdrop of Pentecost and the law, which Luke does not develop.” (Bock, *Acts*, 98.)

⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, 114.

⁷ Polhill acknowledges that Paul develops this view in 2 Corinthians 3, but cautions that Luke nowhere explicitly develops it here in the Book of Acts. (Polhill, *Acts*, 104–05.)

⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, 114–15.

while the Feast of Pentecost/Weeks was for “the firstfruits of *wheat* harvest” (Ex. 34:22).⁹ Whereas Christ was raised as the firstfruits from the dead on the Feast of Firstfruits, Pentecost represented a different firstfruits from the harvest of a different crop. Here, we will see the firstfruits of the conversion of three thousand new believers during the response to Peter’s sermon, later in the chapter (Acts 2:41).¹⁰

The Coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:2–3)

With this background in view, Luke tells us that “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” (vv. 2–3). In many ways, this outpouring of the Holy Spirit for the “birth of the church” parallels the story of the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke.¹¹ Of key importance here is the detail that Peter will offer in his explanatory sermoning Acts 2:32–33: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.” We will give greater attention to this explanation when we come to the passage, but for now it is essential to see the way that the ascension of Jesus in Acts 1 stands in the background of this extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit here in Acts 2.¹² What we are seeing here is the culmination of the exaltation and enthronement of Jesus after his ascension to the right hand of the Father, and of his restoration of the kingdom through the promise of the Holy Spirit: “He is now able to restore Israel, which happens through the gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 23:44–49; Acts 1:3–8; 2:14–36), who empowers Peter and the disciples to courageously proclaim Jesus as Israel’s Messiah to the Jerusalem crowds gathered to

⁹ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 53–54.

¹⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, 106.

¹¹ “Pentecost has often been referred to as ‘the birth of the church.’ A significant parallel between Pentecost and the Lukan infancy narrative is the prominent role of the Spirit in both. John was to be filled with the Spirit for his role as witnesses to Christ (Luke 1:15), as were the various other witnesses to the significance of the child Jesus in God’s saving purposes—Elizabeth (1:41), Zechariah (1:67), and Simeon (2:25–35). Above all, Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit (1:35). Just as through the Spirit God and humanity were perfectly united in Christ, so through the same Spirit God was united with his church at Pentecost. Perhaps even more striking was the prominent role of the Spirit in equipping Jesus for his ministry. The Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism ‘in bodily form’ (Luke 3:22). Likewise in its ‘baptism’ of the Spirit (Acts 1:5), the church received the Spirit in visible form (2:3). Endowed with the Spirit (Luke 4:1,14), Jesus delivered his ‘inaugural address’ at Nazareth, the keynote speech that set the pattern for his entire ministry (4:18). The Nazareth sermon announced the fulfillment in his own ministry of the messianic prophecies and, with its examples from Elijah and Elisha, pointed beyond the boundaries of Israel to the worldwide scope of his messianic mission. With this point the congregation at Nazareth was enraged and rejected him. The ‘inaugural address’ at Pentecost was Peter’s speech (Acts 2:14–40). It too was delivered through the power of the Spirit, which had just come upon him. It too dealt with the fulfillment of the messianic times. It too assumed a worldwide outreach (2:39), and it too would be rejected by a large part of the Jewish community according to the unfolding story of Acts.” (Polhill, *Acts*, 95–96.)

¹² “Everything in chap. 1 is preparatory to the great outburst of the Spirit who poured upon the praying band of believers at Pentecost.” (Polhill, *Acts*, 95.)

celebrate the day of Pentecost.”¹³ This connection seems to be reflected in the way that Jesus had been taken up “into heaven” (Acts 1:11), and now the Holy Spirit comes “from heaven” (v. 2).¹⁴ This outpouring of the Spirit is central to Jesus’ continued actions and teaching in the sequel to the Gospel of Luke (Acts 1:1).

Even so, Peterson’s observation is important: “Dramatically and theologically, Acts 1 has prepared the reader to appreciate the significance of what is recounted in Acts 2. But Luke’s description of the coming of the Spirit is remarkably brief (vv. 1–4). A longer section is devoted to the response of the observers (vv. 5–13), making the point that this critical event took place in the presence of Jews from many nations.”¹⁵ Even in this brief account, we see a striking demonstration of the Holy Spirit’s presence and power—although not with enough details to answer all the questions we might have about this event.¹⁶ The great sound and the visible manifestation of fire in their midst ensured the disciples that this was not a sudden increase of their own abilities, but the gracious gift of God himself.¹⁷ The word “wind” is important, since the same word for *wind* can also mean “Spirit,” both in Hebrew and in Greek (e.g., John 3:8).¹⁸ The imagery of fire is important, since “Throughout the Old Testament fire phenomena are used to depict the presence of God (cf. Exod 3:2; 19:18; 1 Kgs 18:38–39; Ezek 1:27).”¹⁹ While sometimes God is described as a “consuming fire” to symbolize judgment (see Luke 3:16–17), the tongues of fire settling on the apostles “points to the association of heavenly glory in the presence of the Spirit as well as a theophany, with judgment still remaining “yet to come.”²⁰ The fire may also be associated with the purification of the disciples’ lips for speaking on behalf of Christ, as Isaiah’s own lips had been purged by the fiery coal from the heavenly altar before he could serve as a prophetic witness (Isa. 6:6–13).²¹

¹³ Schnabel, *Acts*, 109.

¹⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, 114.

¹⁵ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 129.

¹⁶ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 54.

¹⁷ “This was, therefore, a preparation that they might the better know that the Spirit was now come which Christ had promised. Although it was not so much for their sake as for ours, even as in that the cloven and fiery tongues appeared, there was rather respect had of us, and of all the whole Church in that, than of them. For God was able to have furnished them with necessary ability to preach the gospel, although he should use no sign. They themselves might have known that it came to pass neither by chance, neither yet through their own industry, that they were so suddenly changed; but those signs which are here set down were about to be profitable for all ages; as we perceive at this day that they profit us.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:74.)

¹⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 58.

¹⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, 98.

²⁰ Bock, *Acts*, 98.

²¹ “Firelike tongues may well recall the altar with its holy fire which send the offering up to God. Fire is also a symbol of purity and purification. Each disciple is to make his confession, prayer, praise, testimony a pure offering coming from a holy altar that is burning with sacred fire.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 59.)

Speaking in Other Tongues (Acts 2:4)

After the initial phenomena that marks the arrival of the Holy Spirit, we see the direct effects of the Holy Spirit on the disciples who were gathered: “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” On the filling of the Holy Spirit, Lenski’s reminder is important, lest we make more of this great event than we should: “they all had the Spirit even before Pentecost just as did all the saints of the Old Testament. No saving faith was ever possible without the Spirit.”²² This event, however, was unique in salvation history, which is marked by Jesus’ description of this as their being “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5). Here, the “apostles received this permanent, eschatological gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, which they then offered in Christ’s name to all who repented and received water baptism (2:38–39).”²³

Luke tells us the most notable fruit of this filling with the Holy Spirit: they “began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (v. 4b). The rest of the context tells us that these “other tongues” are not some form of heavenly, ecstatic language, but common languages spoken by “every nation under heaven,” so that the individuals representing those nations in Jerusalem are not hearing a single, heavenly language, but they are, instead, hearing the apostles “telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (vv. 5, 11).²⁴ So, while it would go too far to suggest that this is a *reversal* of Babylon (since the many languages spawned there continue to exist), but something slightly different: “The miracle of tongues maintains the diversity but points out into all lands, nations, and tongues exactly as Jesus does in 1:8.”²⁵ We will see these tongues reappear at decisive moments when the Holy Spirit extends to new areas, following the plan that Jesus articulated in Acts 1:8; see Acts 10:46; 19:6). By this, we see that God gave the gift of tongues to extend the gospel of Jesus beyond Jerusalem and Judea, to bring it into the languages to reach the ends of the earth.²⁶ We also, however, see that this gift is temporary, since God had other plans to bring the gospel to the end of the age:

The gift of tongues was one of the miraculous gifts of the apostolic church and as such, together with other miraculous gifts, served its purpose in attesting the presence of the Spirit at a time when such attestation was needed. Hence it was transient and disappeared when the church grew to such proportions that its very presence and power attested the Spirit’s presence within it. The gift was not intended for preaching, and none of the believers in the apostolic church used it for that purpose. The one apostle who preached to so many nationalities did this without the gift of tongues. God had providentially prepared the vehicle of Greek, the world language of that time, for this purpose. Wherefore the New Testament

²² Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 60.

²³ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 134. “Someone who is already filled with or full of the Spirit can receive a further filling or enabling for a particular ministry (cf. Acts 4:31)”; however, “The verb ‘to baptise’ is not used by Luke for subsequent experiences of the Spirit, only for the initial endowment.” (Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 134, 134n19.)

²⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 105–06.

²⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 62.

²⁶ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:75.

also appeared in Greek.²⁷

This extraordinary gift of tongues, then, is related to—but quite distinct from—the more ordinary gift of facility in languages that God gives to missionaries to help them to preach the gospel in foreign lands: “The gift of “speaking in tongues” is not a more valuable manifestation of the Holy Spirit than the patience, diligence, and determination of new missionaries who learn to speak the language of a people to whom they seek to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, and who learn the language so well that they no longer sound like foreigners but as people who speak ‘just like us.’”²⁸

Bearing Witness to the End of the Earth (Acts 2:5–13)

Having already informed us that this event takes place at Pentecost (v. 1), Luke now tells us about all the people who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast: “Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven” (v. 5). The law required the men of Israel to appear before the Lord in Jerusalem three times per year (Ex. 23:14–17; 34:22–24; Deut. 16:16–17). This day was no ordinary Pentecost, however: “And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished” (v. 6–7a). Although they knew that the men speaking were “Galileans” (v. 7b), they were astounded that each person was able to “hear, each of us in his own native language” (v. 8). The list of nations is intriguing, covering (in broad, impressionistic brushstrokes) the length and breadth of the known world.²⁹ Of special importance are the “visitors from Rome,” since the gospel will eventually find its way to Rome by the end of the Book of Acts (28:17–31).³⁰

The main point of emphasis here is that, in spite of the diversity of languages used, all of them were hearing testimony of what God had done: “we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (v. 11b). Lenski observes that, “While this is a summary, we are safe in saying that the great deeds of God in Christ as referred to, plus the attributes displayed in these deeds.”³¹ Although the ability to speak unlearned languages was a tremendous demonstration, this was not

²⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 63.

²⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, 125.

²⁹ “The list has long intrigued scholars. It begins in what is present-day Iran (Parthia) and then proceeds across the Middle East (Mesopotamia), then southward to Judea, then north to central Turkey (Cappadocia), to northern Turkey (Pontus), eastward to the Aegean coast of Turkey (Asia), inland to Phrygia, then south to the Mediterranean coast of Turkey (Pamphylia). To this point, with the exception of Judea, which seems strangely out of place, the progress is a more-or-less regular curve, from southeast to north to southwest. After Pamphyla no real pattern is discernible. The catalog covers North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Cyrenaica), then north and west all the way to Rome, the southeast to the Mediterranean island of Crete, and finally much farther east and southward to Arabia. There are some striking omissions, areas of particular prominence in Acts, like Syria, Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia.” (Polhill, *Acts*, 102.)

³⁰ “But it is at least a possibility that the Roman church, whose origins are so obscure, may go back to some of these visitors from Rome who heard the gospel in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and carried it home to the imperial city.” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 63.)

³¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 68.

done for the purpose of a demonstration. This ability to speak in other tongues gave a jump-start to the church's bearing witness to Jesus "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). What the church did spontaneously and supernaturally on the day of Pentecost in the presence of thousands of Jews gathered for the festival, the church continues to do through the painstaking work of translating the message of the gospel—and, eventually, the contents of the whole Bible—into every language on the planet.³² This work remains a dire need, since, as of 2024, only 10% of the world's languages have a full Bible translation.³³

Although "all were amazed and perplexed" (v. 12a), Luke records two major responses to this extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The first was curiosity: "What does this mean?" (v. 12b). The second ("but others") was a response of "mocking," dismissing what they had seen by claiming that the disciples "are filled with new wine" (v. 13). It is worth noting here the depth and strength of human depravity, which can dismiss even the clearest proofs of God's presence and power: "There is nothing so wonderful which those men do not turn to a jest who are touched with no care of God; because they do, even upon set purposes, harden themselves in their ignorance in things most plain."³⁴ Still, we should recognize that they had absolutely no idea what they were seeing. As Peterson notes, "Such puzzlement and misunderstanding cried out for explanation, pointing to the need for Peter's sermon."³⁵ To address the gap in understanding, God raised up a preacher to draw many from the crowds to faith in Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. What significance does Luke suggest by speaking about how the day of Pentecost "arrived" (v. 1)? What was the feast of Pentecost/Weeks (Lev. 23:15–22)? When did Pentecost fall in relation to the Passover and the Feast of Firstfruits (Lev. 23:4–14)? How did Christ's death and resurrection fulfill Passover and Firstfruits? How did the Holy Spirit's outpouring fulfill Pentecost, at the time of the firstfruits of wheat (Ex. 34:22)? What kind of harvest is the Holy Spirit bringing in today?
2. What were the visible manifestations of the presence of the Holy Spirit (v. 2–4)? Why were these visible manifestations important to correct any misunderstanding of what was happening? If it is true that Pentecost is the anniversary of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, how were the events of Sinai similar to what happens here at Pentecost (Ex. 19)? How are they different? What conclusions might we draw from this connection?

³² "On the present occasion, the content of the ecstatic utterances was 'the mighty works of God,' and the range of the languages in which these were proclaimed suggests that Luke thought of the coming of the Spirit more particularly as a preparation for the world-wide proclamation of the Gospel. The church of Christ still speaks in many tongues, and if her speech is not now of the supernatural order that marked the day of Pentecost, the message is the same—the mighty works of God." (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 58.)

³³ Wycliffe Global Alliance, "2024 Global Scripture Access," accessed on July 22, 2025. <<https://www.wycliffe.net/resources/statistics/>>

³⁴ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:81.

³⁵ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 138.

3. Where does Luke tell us that the Jews at Pentecost had come from (vv. 5, 9–11a)? Why is there such an emphasis on the great range of countries and languages who were present at this time? How does the ability of each of these men to hear “in his own language/tongues” the “mighty works of God” help us to understand the nature and purpose of speaking in tongues? What is similar and different about the modern work of translating the gospel and the Bible into new languages?

4. How does Jesus and the rest of the New Testament compare God’s global mission to work in a field to collect a harvest? How do the 3,000 souls who believe in Jesus on the day of Pentecost signify the firstfruits of that mission into the world (Acts 2:41)? What role has God called you to serve in his global mission? How has he called you to bear witness to Jesus where you live? Is God calling you to bear witness to Jesus somewhere else, to the end of the earth?