

Hearts on Fire | Acts 2:1-11

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I want to share a story from church history that I love. Before he was beautifully converted to Jesus Christ, the great 18th c. Reformer John Wesley was an Anglican priest. He was involved in Christian ministry, though it didn't seem to bear any lasting fruit. Wesley was incredibly disheartened by this. And in the year 1736, he was on a ship sailing the Atlantic Ocean from England to America when a tremendous storm hit. People aboard the ship feared for their lives and cried out as the main-sail ripped and water from the storm began to pour in between the decks.

Now in the midst of this chaos and fear, there was a group of Moravians missionaries from Germany holding a worship service below deck, singing praises to God in the midst of the storm. Wesley was intrigued by this group, and by the peace they exhibited in the midst of the storm. The leader of the group came up to Wesley and asked him, "Sir, do you know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?" John Wesley drew himself up to his full height and responded, "Sir, I am an Anglican priest." The man replied, "That doesn't answer my question. I asked if you knew Jesus as your Lord and Savior." Wesley then responded, "Sir, I do." But later that night, Wesley wrote in his journal that in response to this question, he wrote, "I lied."

Sometime later he was back in London, still experiencing this emptiness in his heart. And one evening he attended another gathering of Moravians on Aldersgate Street, and someone was reading Martin Luther's "Preface to the Epistle to the Romans." Wesley wrote this:

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

John Wesley experienced the very Presence of God through the Holy Spirit in his life, and Wesley was never the same. And as we know, from that time on, God used him to lead many thousands of people to Christ during the spiritual revival known as the Great Awakening.

Now, many years *before* the Great Awakening, there was an even greater awakening — and this was the moment the Church itself was born. Pentecost. And the story is told in Acts 2. And it's a story that reminds us of this great truth: that when God pours out his Spirit, ordinary people become instruments of extraordinary grace. And I'll just say, dear friends, that we need to be praying for fresh seasons of the extraordinary outpouring of God's Spirit — to awaken and empower the church and so that we might reach the final frontiers for Christ.

So let's turn now to Acts 2:1–11 and see what happens when the Spirit of God descends on his people. And of course, as we do so, we need to keep in mind the words of Jesus a little earlier in Acts 1:8 which is really the structural spine of the entire book of Acts. It's the theological thesis statement. Jesus said, "*But 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.*" So Jesus had given this great promise, and the disciples were waiting in Jerusalem for the Spirit as Jesus had instructed them to do.

And then, Acts 2, verse 1: “*When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place.*” As we study God’s Word, it’s always good to be asking questions of the text. And one question we might ask is why Pentecost? Why did Jesus choose Pentecost as the day when he would pour out his Spirit on the church? I can think of two possible reasons.

First, it had the effect of bringing the nations together. Pentecost (which is the Greek word for 50th) was a major Jewish holiday, and it took place 50 days after Passover. And it was one of the three Jewish feasts that called for a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. So there would have been Jewish pilgrims present from all the known nations. Thousands of pilgrims. In fact, we are told by the Jewish historian Josephus that the city of Jerusalem which normally had a population of 150,000 would, during this holiday, be swollen in numbers to upwards of a million people. The city and suburbs would have been packed, people coming in from all parts of the earth, many of whom would have heard about or even witnessed this miracle.

Now here’s a second reason Jesus may have chosen Pentecost. Pentecost was also referred to in the Old Testament as the Feast of Harvests, or the Feast of the Ingathering, and it was the time when God’s people would come to the temple in Jerusalem in order to thank God for the harvest, for blessing their crops that year. And so we can see the symbolic significance of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on this day. It was God’s signal that a far greater harvest was now beginning – a harvest not of wheat or barley, but of souls. Not from the fields of one small nation, but from every nation under heaven. In fact, according to v. 41, there was a spiritual harvest that day of about 3,000 people. And that was, of course, just the beginning!

So we’ve considered why God may have chosen Pentecost. Now let’s look more closely at what actually happened on that day. And what happens when the Holy Spirit descends on his people and fills them. What does the Spirit do? Well, we’re going to look at four (4) marks of the Spirit’s presence among us. The Spirit unites, the Spirit empowers us, the Spirit turns us outward, and the Spirit fills our hearts with praise.

First, the Holy Spirit unites. V. 1: “*When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place.*” So before the Spirit descended, the disciples are already gathered together. They weren’t scattered, isolated. They were together in one place. The text doesn’t tell us whether it was the upper room or one of the many rooms or halls of the temple. But we do know that God wanted them together. Why? Because the Spirit was about to fill a community, not isolated individuals. He was about to empower a people. And so is drawing people together.

Now the disciples are already together. But God wants more people to witness this grand miracle. And to be a part of what He’s doing. So how does he go about gathering them? I find this very interesting. He summons them. How? Vs. 2:

And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

God’s summons came in the form of a sound which resembled a mighty rushing wind. It was loud. And it had the effect of bringing people there from all over the city. Vs. 6 tells us that “*...at this sound the multitude came together.*”

Now we’re used to hearing sirens today. Our family lives less than half a mile from the fire department, and we hear sirens constantly. And so we don’t always pay a lot of attention to them. But just imagine the effect in Jerusalem of the equivalent of a thunderous air raid alarm

suddenly going off, and people not knowing what it meant. So the multitude came rushing to the place where this was going on.

The Holy Spirit was drawing his people together, and uniting them. And by the way, according to vv. 9-10, there are representatives from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth (beyond Samaria). And so we're seeing this mini-fulfillment of Acts 1:8.

Let me make one other point here. Pentecost is often associated with the story in Gen. 11 of the Tower of Babel. You remember. . . following the flood, people came together and settled in one place. And they spoke only one language. And they decided they wanted to build a monument to their own greatness. So they designed a tower reaching up to the heavens, so that would make a name for themselves, and so that they wouldn't be scattered over the face of the earth.

And what does God do? He brings judgement upon the people in the form of confusing their language so that they wouldn't understand one another. And then God dispersed them over the face of the earth so that they couldn't coalesce into one rebellious body. But at Pentecost, God reversed the curse of Babel. The nations which had been scattered, were brought back together. . . and suddenly, all the language barriers were lifted. At least for a time. And they could understand one another. So at Pentecost we get this first glimpse of the unity that comes about through the Holy Spirit. And as we read through the rest of the book of Acts we begin to see different groups of people who had been isolated from one another, Jews, Samaritans, and finally Gentiles – united as members of the body of Christ. This is the work of the Spirit, to unite us in Christ.

And as the Holy Spirit united the disciples, and filled them with Himself, he gave them a common love for one another (people who might otherwise have very little in common), and He gave them a common mission. Friends, it's a good thing to pray for yourself, and your family, that you might be filled afresh with God's Holy Spirit. A good thing to make that a daily prayer. But also don't forget to pray for this congregation as well as the whole church of Jesus Christ, for a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit for God's people. . . for there can be no life in our church without the life giver, and no effective witness without his power.

Which leads us to the second point. First, the Holy Spirit unites. And second, the Holy Spirit empowers us. We'll just touch on this as it reinforces some of what Brian Gurney taught us last week. V. 2:

And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance."

Wind, and tongues of fire, and the ability to speak in other language – these are all signs of God's power breaking into our human existence from the outside. What the Spirit does is empower us to do things we can't do on our own, we can't do naturally. Such as being witnesses for Christ, as we learned last week.

But the Spirit also empowers us in other ways. He helps us pray when we don't know how to pray. He helps us overcome sin and do what we know is right but find ourselves unable to do it in our own strength. He empowers us to endure hardship and suffering with grace and courage. He helps us understand God's Word. In short, it's the Holy Spirit who gives us the power to live the Christian life. Without the Spirit, it's impossible.

The Spirit unites. He empowers us. And then third, the Holy Spirit turns us outward.

When I was in the 6th grade, my favorite teacher was Mr. Dillingham who taught science. And he had an engaging way of introducing concepts. I remember one day he took our class outdoors to the merry-go-round and placed a red kickball at its center. Then he quickly spun the merry-go-round and the ball immediately flew outwards, and bounced off of one of my unsuspecting classmates. Of course, he used this illustration to describe *centrifugal* motion where the object starts in the center and moves outward.

It's also a beautiful illustration of the way God works. God has designed his people to start from Him as our center, and then spread his ways and his nature to all around. Sadly, some American churches are what we might call ecclesiastical cul-de-sacs, with lots of believers gathering in, but very little good news going back out into an unbelieving world. It's hard to break out. But that's the role of the Spirit, sending us, his mission church, out from our familiar and comfortable surroundings to proclaim and demonstrate the love of Christ to a needy world. It happened to the disciples who had been hiding behind locked doors weeks earlier and were now boldly proclaiming to the nations the mighty works of God. The Spirit gives us an outward orientation.

What can this look like for us? Here's one example from our family. We live on a little dead-end street with a dozen houses, and wonderful neighbors whom we love. When we first moved in, we didn't know if any of them were followers of Christ. So we started a little tradition. Every Tuesday night when we took the garbage cans to the street, we used that as a prompt to pray specifically for each family by name. We've now been doing it for years. And God has greatly blessed our friendships with these neighbors, especially during times of crisis in their lives where some have asked for prayer, some have come to church with us, and one neighbor surrendered his life to Jesus a few hours before he died. One of the effects of praying for our neighbors on garbage day is that it keeps us focused outwardly on the people around us. Praying for others is a great way to keep your heart turned outward — because it is almost impossible to pray faithfully for the people around you week after week, and not find yourself genuinely caring about them, looking for opportunities to serve them, and ready to speak when God opens the door.

The Spirit unites. He empowers us. He turns us outward. And then fourth and finally, the Holy Spirit fills us with hearts of praise. Beginning with v. 5:

5 Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6 And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. 7 And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, 11 both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."

What's happening here? The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, and even though they were from Galilee and presumably spoke Aramaic, Greek and Hebrew, they began speaking in all these other languages that they hadn't learned. And didn't know. And what were they saying? The literal translation of vs. 11 is that they were speaking the "*the greatnesses of God.*"

This is a preaching draft.

The Spirit opened their lips and their response was to publicly declare to all the nations gathered how great God is. They were worshipping the Lord in these amazing languages. It seems that not only did the Spirit anoint their heads with tongues of fire, but He anointed their hearts as well. They were filled with passion as every remnant of timidity and hesitancy and weakness was swallowed up in the experience of God's wonder and greatness. And they couldn't keep it in. The Holy Spirit is who enables God's people to worship him and declare his wonder and praise.

What changed John Wesley that evening on Aldersgate Street in London wasn't a new idea or a fresh commitment to religious duty. What changed him was an encounter with the living God through his Holy Spirit. The fire fell, and Wesley was never the same.

What about you? Do you sometimes feel like you're going through the motions, knowing the right words, perhaps even serving in the church, but aware of a certain emptiness. . . a distance from God, a coldness that you can't quite explain. Perhaps the fire has gone out. Or maybe you're not sure it ever really burned in the first place. In Luke 11, Jesus promised that the Father in heaven is more than willing to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. Ask him to fill you afresh today. Ask him to fill our church. To bring revival to our nation and our world. To set our hearts ablaze once more with love for him and love for the people around us. For the harvest is plentiful. The world is waiting. And the Spirit is willing. **Amen.**