

I WILL POUR OUT MY SPIRIT

SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD

By Steve Zeisler

Don and Marie Burgess have been missionaries of this church for many years in a remote region of northern Mexico. I recently heard Don talk about his experience at our men's retreat, and he spoke of what had the most impact on him. He said he realized partway through the final meal of the retreat that around the table were men who had a number of different countries as their birthplace, including the United States, Korea, Egypt, Holland, Lebanon, and South Africa. No effort had been made to put these men together, and Don saw the hand of God in it. One of the core tenets of the Christian faith is joining together folks who otherwise would be separated because of their backgrounds, their languages, or their outlook prior to knowing the Lord. I want to commend to us as a way of life the kind of insight Don had, more frequently seeing God's presence even in little things.

I mention this story because the issues of languages and division are central in Acts 2, our text in this message. Verses 1-21:

And when the day of Pentecost had come, they [the 120 believers, who had been told to wait for the gift of the Father] were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent, rushing, wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.

Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were bewildered, because they were each one hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and marveled, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs--we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." And they continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others were mocking and saying, "They are full of sweet wine."

But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel:

**'And it shall be in the last days,' God says,
'That I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind;
And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
And your young men shall see visions,
And your old men shall dream dreams;**

**‘Even upon my bondslaves, both men and women,
I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit
And they shall prophesy.
‘And I will grant wonders in the sky above,
And signs on the earth beneath,
Blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke.
‘The sun shall be turned into darkness,
And the moon into blood,
Before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come.
‘And it shall be, that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”**

In just a moment we'll consider the experience of the first 120 Christians, which led to Peter's preaching. But I want to step back first and look at the setting and background to these events.

The final chapter of the salvation story

One of the things Peter declares as he quotes Joel is that the first coming of Christ began what the Bible calls the last days, and the second coming of Christ will end the last days. Therefore we are living in the last days, the final chapter of salvation history.

One reason it is important to know this is that in almost every generation many false messiahs arise. Individuals or groups will observe the church to be weak, broken, withdrawn, and powerless, and will decide that what the world needs is a new message. Mohammed encountered such a lifeless version of Christianity that he became convinced that his people needed a call to holiness that he couldn't find in the church. The world needed a new religion, a new prophet, new scriptures. Similarly, earlier in this country's history Joseph Smith perceived the church to be broken and weak, and decided that it needed new scriptures and a new gospel. Deceptive prophets and minor cults spring up all the time. In each case false messiahs begin with a desire to revitalize the church of Jesus Christ because they perceive it to have fallen into disrepair.

But the church does not need a new message. No Age of Aquarius needs to dawn. The gospel does not need innovation. Rather, what revitalizes the church and gives it life is for its people to go back to the Scriptures, truth that has already been delivered to us, and see it afresh, believe it thoroughly, and live it with joy. The only thing that is left to complete Christ's saving work is for our Lord to return.

As I mentioned, another large theme in this text has to do with the issue of languages. The pride of our ancient forebears expressed itself in building the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), which represented an attempt by human beings to make themselves God. The resulting confusion of languages was a judgment intended to limit our capacity to accomplish the worst.

But on the day of Pentecost the variety of languages of earth became an opportunity to form a symphony. The 120 believers, baptized by the Spirit, were speaking many languages they had never learned--Parthian, Elamite, Phrygian, and so on. It didn't sound like a symphony to the people of the time; in fact the scoffers said they sounded like drunks. But for those with ears to hear, it was a concert of the Spirit. Everyone who heard realized that the Lord God of heaven was being praised in their native language, the one closest to their heart.

Note also that God's gift was not for a limited few. Languages representing all kinds of people and places (verses 9-11) are deliberately mentioned. Further, the Spirit came on men and women, sons and daughters, old and young, poor and rich, slaves and free, educated and common.

Now let's examine the events themselves. What happened to these people? They probably weren't thinking about the tower of Babel or making observations about the great plan of God. They were just there, doused by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Let's try to picture what happened. It helps if we read carefully and use our imaginations.

The descent of the Spirit

We read first that there was a sound like a mighty wind blowing. Now, it doesn't say the wind blew. There is no reference to any physical evidence of a hurricane-force wind, such as uprooted trees or fallen buildings. It was evidently a very loud sound reminiscent of the wind, perhaps like a blaring siren. And people, wherever they were at nine o'clock in the morning, in their homes having breakfast or preparing for the day, were stirred.

Wind is one of the symbols of the presence of God in the Bible. The Hebrew word *ruach* can be translated as "breath" or "wind," or as "Spirit." It was the wind of the Spirit that blew on the surface of the water at creation (Genesis 1:2). It was the wind of the Spirit that held back the Red Sea so that the Israelites could escape their enemies (Exodus 14:21). A sound like wind would prepare people for God's presence and activity.

Then we observe, distributed on the heads of the 120, flames like candles. Each of the 120 were given the privilege of this symbol and the reality behind it. It meant that God had taken up residence in them, never to leave. Every true Christian has the same experience: giving their heart to Christ and becoming the residence of God himself--though the symbol of a visible flame does not need repeating.

Paul would later describe believers as "the temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19). One of the greatest calls to ethical living is the awareness that God is your companion wherever you go. The flames announcing to the 120 that they were the home of God also indicated that his home was cleansed and made ready for him, that their sin--the failure, the inadequacy, the unrighteousness, everything about them that made them unworthy of God--had been burned away.

These men and women would have already had the information about Jesus' sacrifice as the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world. But what they experienced in a new way this day was an encounter with the truth that overwhelmed them. I hope you can recall times when God has spoken to you of his love, of your cleansing, of your future, when you powerfully felt his embrace.

Having experienced the love of God in a profound way, they could not help but give thanks. Luke says they began to declare the mighty works of God. I don't think anything they said was planned. When Gabriel told Mary she was going to become the bearer of God's Son, and it sank in to her that it was true, she spontaneously began to speak the mighty works of God:

"My soul exalts the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior...."
(Luke 1:46-47)

I think something like that happened here.

So here were these people with the experience of God, starting to speak the praises and greatness of God, except it miraculously came out in Parthian, Elamite, Phrygian, and other languages they had never learned. That was a privilege too, because there were people gathered around after the sound of the wind who spoke those languages, and they were realizing that God loved them enough to speak to them in the tongue of their childhood.

I have another Don Burgess story. A translation of the Scriptures had been made for a nearby tribe in Mexico. It was presented to the chief of this tribe at a ceremony at which Don was present. When someone asked the chief, “Do you like this book?” he said, “No, I don’t like the book at all!” Then he explained, “All of our tribe speaks Spanish. We have had the Bible in Spanish for hundreds of years. The stories are beautiful. But this book is in the tongue of my mother. Now I must obey what I read. That is going to create difficulty!”

What a gift of God it is to be able to speak to someone in the tongue of their childhood, to let them hear.

Let me make an observation about *glossolalia* or speaking in tongues, since it is so controversial in the church. Some have the modern experience of speaking in rapid, jumbled syllables, and feel God’s presence when they do so. The question is, is that what is referenced in Acts? There are tongues employed here, and Paul writes about an expression of tongues in 1 Corinthians. All of the New-Testament references to tongues use the same Greek word, which refers to speaking in a known human language that the speaker hasn’t learned. In the case of Corinthians, there was often nobody present who spoke that language, and a miraculous gift of interpretation was needed to make what was said understood. But in the New Testament there is no description of what many today call a private prayer language. Now, is God likely to surprise us and use someone’s experience of private prayer language to give them blessing? Why not? Of course he could. He uses all manner of ways to bless us. But I don’t think it is the tongues referenced in the New Testament.

The last thing to observe in our text is that a crowd gathered around, giving Peter the opportunity to preach. In that crowd were two kinds of people. One kind ultimately thought everything about this praise of God, this descent of the Spirit, this blessing where there was no blessing before, this renewing of the world through the gospel, was ridiculous. “They are drunk.” Today this kind of person’s response is, “You are wasting your life believing a myth. I’m glad it makes you happy, but . . . (*what an idiot*).” The other kind of people find themselves asking, “What does this mean? What is going on?” There are a great many on the way to belief who don’t know they are asking that question yet, but part of them wants to know. Somewhere deep inside, God’s making himself present attracts them, raises questions, bugs them, works on them.

When these people were moved by the Spirit to ask, “What does this mean?” Peter got up and told them. Peter the one-time coward was now Peter the lion of God, given courage to preach. (All these people spoke Greek, and Peter undoubtedly preached in Greek, requiring no miracle of language, so that everybody could understand it at the same time.) The Spirit, having drawn his hearers, gave Peter words to say that were filled with conviction: “You knew of the miracles that attested to who Jesus was, yet you nailed him to the cross. You are guilty of a great crime! The solution is to repent and embrace this One who is now risen from the dead” (2:22-39). And three thousand came to faith that day at Peter’s preaching. The descent of the Spirit gave the first believers a profound awareness of what it meant to be forgiven and filled.

Life in the Spirit

There is no Christian faith, no church, no forgiveness if God does not make it real by his presence. Knowing about these things apart from the entrance of the Spirit into our lives, his, granting us gifts, encouragement, opportunity, strength, hope, and miracles when they occur, accomplishes nothing. The demons are well versed in all of this information.

But there are some things we would do well to have in mind as we consider life in the Spirit. Too often we confuse the gifts of the Spirit with God himself. That is, when something divine happens to us, we fixate on the immediate outcome and lose track of the Giver of the gift. As a pastor I get literature all the time inviting me to conferences. For instance, one might be *How to Create a Revival in Your Church*. Another might be *Learn How to Have Authentic*

Worship in Your Church. Or, How to Perform Healings. The fallacy in all this is thinking that genuine experience of Spirit-led renewal can be reduced to easy steps and then marketed.

I am most often touched by God when I read Scripture. But the Bible is just the gift. It's too easy, if care is not taken, to focus on the book and not the Author.

We can inadvertently make some experience of the Spirit, especially one accompanied by intense emotion, a test we apply to others when questioning the authenticity of their faith. Or perhaps in dry periods of our own we seek to reproduce the old feelings and experience, instead of learning to have faith that is not immediately rewarded with positive emotions.

I have two questions in closing. First, is there some element of hypocrisy in your life? Are you pretending, using "God" language, claiming the living presence of God when you know that you are making it up? Do you want the results of such claims without the real thing? If so, you need to repent. Hypocrisy unchecked grows more deadly and difficult to abandon.

Second, are you convinced that the unbelieving world is made up of those who want to hear the message as surely as those who scoff at Christians? Too often we limit our associations to other church folk and expect the worst from outsiders. Many of us need new openness to a Spirit-born passion for those who will ask, "What does this mean?"

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