

Acts 2:1-41 Questions and answers of Pentecost

INTRODUCTION

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the Day of Pentecost.

The festival occurred 50 days after the Passover and was for that reason called “Pentecost” in Greek. The books of Moses called the celebration the Feast of Weeks (Exodus 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:9-11), the Feast of Harvest (Exodus 23:16), and also the Day of Firstfruits (Numbers 28:26).

However, if I were to ask you to describe Pentecost, I suspect you would not tell me about the prescribed sacrifices and other practices of the Jewish holiday. Instead, you would tell me about the Holy Spirit coming in power and how the apostles spoke in languages they had not learned, and how 3,000 souls received—with deep conviction—the good news of Jesus. That’s what we think of when we hear the words, “Day of Pentecost.” We think of it as a Christian day, and indeed, now it is.

The Day of Pentecost stands alongside three major other major events in Scripture (and really history):

Creation

The incarnation of the Son of God

Christ’s return

I. The events of Pentecost fulfilled the promise and purposes of Jesus.

On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit came in power. You will remember just a few days earlier, the Lord explained to the disciples that they were to wait for the powerful coming of the Holy Spirit and with that coming they would be witnesses locally, regionally, and across the world. (Acts 1:7-8).

This implies a couple of things:

- 1) They were already familiar with the Holy Spirit. Jesus speaking to Nicodemus said, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”*** Unless we are willing to say these men and women waiting for the Holy Spirit to come were not yet Christians, then we must acknowledge that the Spirit was already present in them.
- 2) They were waiting for the Spirit to come in an exceptionally powerful way, at the right time, for the right reason, with a certain objective in mind. The objective was not to save the disciples or affirm their faith. The objective was for them to have power to preach effectively.

The miraculous ability to speak in other languages was a gift needed for the moment. While they may have been adequately able to communicate the gospel in Greek or Aramaic, the people who heard praise toward God in their own languages were instantly drawn to the disciples and their message of Jesus.

God was, if you will, re-tilling the rocky soil. You noticed how Peter in His preaching did not hold back, right? He says to these Jews from various parts of the world,

²² ***“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—*** ²³ ***this Jesus, delivered up according to the***

definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. (ESV)

This Pentecost resulted in 3,000 souls from many nations acting as the first-fruits of the universal church of Jesus Christ. In a very real sense, the Pentecost of Acts 2 not only fulfilled the promise of Jesus, but produced a truly great fulfillment of the Jewish celebration of the Day of Firstfruits.

THE SIGNS

With this passage of Scripture, it is important focus on what God gave at Pentecost. We naturally focus on the tongues, especially since there has been an emphasis in parts of the Christian church on speaking in tongues. But God gave two signs in addition to the tongues that day. They were wind and fire—and we see them in vv 2 and 3.

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. (ESV)

It is important to know that when we hear the word “spirit” we think either of the Holy Spirit or the human spirit. But in several of the languages of the day, the word for spirit came from the same root word used for wind or breath.

So when we read that a ***sound came from heaven like a mighty wind***, we should be reminded of the Spirit of God moving over the surface of the waters as the days of creation began. We can almost imaging the powerful wind of God, God’s Spirit, passing over the formless void that would become the earth teeming with life at the command of God. We should remember too that God created man from the dust of the earth and breathed life into Adam and he became a living being.

This same powerful presence of God’s Spirit (that Divine Breath) now entered the place where the disciples waited and prayed.

The test to know if someone is filled by the Spirit (as the disciples were at Pentecost) is not to know if they have spoken in tongues, but whether they powerfully and effectively testify of Jesus Christ. When they speak, are people won to Christ?¹

¹ James Montgomery Boice, Acts: An Expository Commentary, 1997, 43.

The second sign was tongues of fire.

Fire often indicated the presence of God as when Moses ascended the mountain to receive God's Law and was...or the people of Israel being led by a pillar of fire—a sign of God's presence with them.

Light and warmth. ²

On this occasion, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit's coming was the disciples' ability to speak in languages they had no ability to speak on their own.

² Boice, 44.

II. The events of Pentecost raised questions.

The rest of Luke's narrative flows from a series of questions asked by the Jews and proselytes who had traveled to Jerusalem from surrounding nations for the celebration. *Many had been there since Passover*, so they were *dwelling* in Jerusalem at the time. We see a list of nations in verses 9-10.

Luke describes these men (v 5), as, "*devout men from every nation under heaven.*"

Questions 1 and 2

The first question (vv 7b-8) was likely rhetorical.

"Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"

It didn't really need an answer, because by asking the question the answer was obvious. The question implied that people from Galilee barely know how to speak Greek, let alone Persian, or Latin, or Arabic. How are these guys out-performing their meager upbringing? If you think I am overstating the fact, look at Acts 4:13. There we see that the Jewish Council perceived the simple nature of Peter and John but were astonished at their boldness and ability.

The second question (v 8) falls on the heels of the first,

"And how is it we hear, each of us in his own language?"

Well we know the answer to that, but the crowd at this point was bewildered (v 5). Ultimately this question is answered with the next question found in verse 12, which we will see in a moment.

Some 20-25 years after these events in Acts 2, the Apostle Paul would write to the church at Corinth, that he does not grow discouraged because, ***“God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”*** To which he adds—speaking of his himself, ***“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power of God belongs to God and not to us”*** (II Corinthians 4:6-7).

If that was true of the highly educated Paul, how much more so of these disciples from Galilee. But God is manifesting His power in a similar way here in Jesus’s disciples from Galilee. God’s glory shines brightly in these simple men.

Some of you will remember the song, “Ordinary People.” Good chooses ordinary people who are willing to do as He commands. People who will give Him all, no matter how small your all may seem to you.

Question 3

Well, Peter does not have to consider answering the second question because the next question is really the critical issue.

Members of the perplexed crowd ask each other, ***“What does this mean?”*** (v 12)

Peter furnished a lengthy response, quoting three Old Testament passages to prove his point. His response runs from verses 14-36.

Now this question, “What does it mean?” got Peter and the other 11 apostles—to their feet (v 14). This is a question that needs to be answered. Peter calls for the crowd’s attention:

“Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words.” (v 14b)

He immediately dismissed the accusation that they were drunk. As one commentator put it, “Drunkenness may add language, but it does not add languages.” In other words, drunk people might talk excessively, but they don’t talk in languages they’ve never learned. Besides, it was only 9:00 in the morning (or as the text says, the third hour of the day).

Then in v 17, Peter cites the Old Testament prophecy from Joel 2:28-32. Turn with me to Joel.

JOEL: The whole prophecy of Joel is short. Only 3 chapters. Peter quotes from a small portion of chapter 2 to associate it with the events unfolding that day in Jerusalem.

Joel prophesied at a time of great distress in Israel. He told the people that the famine, the locusts, the bareness of their land, and their great suffering was God’s judgment of His people. It was so bad that Joel began his prophecy (1:2-3),

² ***Hear this, O elders,
And listen, all inhabitants of the land.
Has anything like this happened in your days
Or in your fathers’ days?***

³ ***Tell your sons about it,
And let your sons tell their sons,
And their sons the next generation.***
(NASB)

Joel depicted the invading army [whether it was just the locusts or an invading army, like the Babylonians (or both) is unclear] but of this army, whether man or beast, Joel wrote:

***A fire consumes before them
And behind them a flame burns.
The land is like the garden of Eden before them
But a desolate wilderness behind them,
And nothing at all escapes them. (2:3)***

But there was hope. God might relent. In Joel 2:13, the prophet reported,

***12 “Yet even now,” declares the LORD,
“Return to Me with all your heart,
And with fasting, weeping and mourning;
13 And rend your heart and not your garments.”
Now return to the LORD your God,
For He is gracious and compassionate,
Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness
And relenting of evil.***

The hope for their immediate despair came a few verses later. In verse 18, in response to the people’s change of heart, in response to the priest’s petitioning the Lord, the prophet said,

***18 Then the Lord will be zealous for His land
And will have pity on His people.***

From verse 18 through 27, Joel told how God would restore what the army of locusts had taken.

However, God's gracious response took a new direction in Joel 2:28. And this is the passage quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost. Verse 28 reads:

***“And it shall come to pass afterward [“after this,” NASB],
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.”***

It is helpful to know, that Peter did not quote from the Hebrew version of Joel. He quoted for the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew text. The Septuagint takes an interpretive approach to the very beginning of Joel's verse 28:

So turning back now to Acts we see how the translators of the Septuagint applied their understanding of the passage. Here in Luke's account, Peter quotes from the Septuagint, which reads,

“In the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh....” The Hebrew text of Joel just read, *“It will come to pass **after this** [after the time when God turned back His judgment and blessed His people again] that I will pour out My Spirit....”*

The change that is important to notice (there are other minor ones) is that the rendering that Peter cites adds, “In the last days.” Now why this interpretation?

Well, we can't read the mind of the Septuagint's translator, but the interpretation makes perfect sense. Why?

Well, in verse 20 the passage reads, ***“the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.”***

Joel’s prophecy was foreseeing a dreadful final day on the horizon. A day that Peter (though he does not use the word “fulfill” or fulfillment”) clearly sees as taking place in their midst.

In addition, Joel 3 speaks of a day when the nations will be gathered and judged in the “Valley of Jehoshaphat”...Jehoshaphat meaning “the LORD judges.” So, clearly the context of Joel’s prophecy is one of the last days and the “day of the Lord’s coming in judgment.”

I suspect we all would have been more comfortable if Peter had just cited verses 17, 18 where we see things like this happening among Jesus disciples on the Day of Pentecost. And I am sure we are ready to affirm verse 21, ***“And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”***

It is verses 19 and 20 that give us trouble. Many have tried to explain Peter’s use of these verses. Explanations include:

- 1) To get from vv 17 and 18 to verse 21, he had to quote vv 19 and 20 even though they weren’t specifically relevant to the immediate context. Not a very satisfying explanation.
- 2) Some suggest the fulfillment of the passage comes in stages, some now, some later... vv 20, 21 coming later, before, during, or after the Millennium.
- 3) Some suggest Joel’s prophecy was just a “type” a representation of the sort of thing God does... something akin to, “He did this in

Joel's day (rescued His people and empowered them) and He is doing a similar thing here today." Joel's prophecy is a "type."

- 4) Still others suggest this is an actual fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. I tend to think this is the best way to take Peter's usage.

This of course leads to the question, "How on earth were the signs, the billows of smoke, the sun being turned to darkness, the moon to blood fulfilled at Pentecost?"

A couple of brief answers:

- 1) When John the Baptist was about his ministry in the wilderness, baptizing those who came to him, he said:

¹⁶ John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Notice Jesus would baptize in two ways, with the Holy Spirit and with fire. While the baptism with fire can be interpreted in different ways, the context suggests "fire" is God's judgment, because John goes on to say,

"His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Jesus collects His wheat, but He burns with unquenchable fire those He considers chaff.

In the context of Acts 2:19-20, Peter is showing that Christ demands we make a choice: follow Him or don't. There is a day of judgment regarding Christ and we must be alert to the times when God extends His mercy and offers salvation.

- 2) It is helpful to remember that when Scripture uses images like those found in vv 19-20, they are not meant to be taken literally, they don't literally mean, for example, that the moon will turn to blood. But something dreadful will happen. And it may be in this situation that Joel's prophecy applies to the Day of Pentecost because the world the Jews were used to was being horrifically altered by the coming of the Son of Man...and ultimately it will end in a day of judgment. The men standing there at Pentecost knew the meaning of the passage. They understood judgment was at hand, and would shortly understand that at the center of all this was Jesus.
- 3) Other passages of Scripture may indicate, as Joel's passage does, that we are currently in the last days:

Hebrews 1:1-2

¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

II Timothy 3:1-5

³ ***But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ²For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.***

A more in-depth discussion of Peter's use of Joel's prophecy can be found in this article: https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/40/40-1/40-1-pp013-026_JETS.pdf

Without Peter's further explanation beginning in v 22, one might just think that Peter's work was done. The Spirit came in power, the disciples spoke in tongues of the gathered nations, and God was glorified in the process. At this point, all we know is that the disciples proclaimed the mighty works of God (v 11).

But what was the point of all this? Why had the Spirit come in power? What were the disciples to do with this gathering of bewildered people? And how did Joel's prophecy apply to them?

Well, you'll remember what Jesus had said days earlier,

"It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ 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." (1:7-8)

Peter, by the power of the Holy Spirit, must connect the dots, to draw his audience's attention to the central message of all of Scripture, the person and work of Jesus Christ.

He needs to show them that, while they may be devout, they also needed to repent. Why did they need to repent? Because these very men had conspired with lawless men to have Jesus crucified less than two months earlier. They have blood on their hands...innocent blood. It is Peter's job to declare the good news of Jesus who was now raised from the dead and ascended into heaven as Lord.

Two More Old Testament Passages—the Psalms

To draw their attention to Christ, Peter cites part of two additional Old Testament passages—both from the Psalms of David.

The first is from Psalm 16 (that we see here in vv 25-28).

²⁵ ***For David says concerning him,***

“I saw the Lord always before me,

for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken;

²⁶ ***therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;***
my flesh also will dwell in hope.

²⁷ ***For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,***
or let your Holy One see corruption.

²⁸ ***You have made known to me the paths of life;***
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’

We see Peter’s reason for choosing this passage in verses 29-34. It was not David, who had written the Psalm, who would not be left in Sheol, which the Greek language translated as Hades (v 27). And it was not David whose body would not see corruption—that is decomposition. It had to be someone else and that someone else was Jesus—He is the Holy One of verse 27.

To advance the point further, Peter challenged the crowd with a few points:

- 1) We know where David is buried—and his body is still there today (v 29).
- 2) Because of the promises of God to David, David knew that one of his descendants would sit on his throne. In fact many descendants did, but there was a special One that David anticipated and Jesus met all the requirements (v 30).
- 3) Peter said, I and my companions standing here with me know personally—and have seen with our own eyes—the One who has been raised up from the dead as the Psalm expresses (v 32).

Conclusion:

³³ ***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.

Peter then cited one more verse from Psalm 110 and gave two more sentences of explanation. He began by saying in v 34:

³⁴ For David did not ascend into the heavens, ...

By this Peter meant, David did not bodily ascend into heaven, but as the Psalm points out someone else would. So David under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote:

***“The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool.”***

Here we see the end for Christ’s enemies—defeat and subjugation. They will be His footstool. David, in this Psalm is acknowledging that He has two Lords over Him. The One says to the other, sit at My right hand in the place of universal authority and dominate your enemies.

Peter does not make reference to it here, but this Psalm also speaks of Jesus unique role as a priest in the order of Melchizedek, which the author of the book of Hebrew explains.

It is one thing to attribute a verse to Jesus, it is another when Jesus attributes a verse to Himself. And that’s what He did as He taught at the temple compound in Jerusalem. It was after His triumphal entry and only days before His crucifixion.

He gave the people a puzzle to ponder. It is found in Mark 12:35-37:

³⁵ And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, “How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? ³⁶ David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared,

***“The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet.”***

³⁷ David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?" And the great throng heard him gladly.

People liked the puzzle Jesus gave them to ponder. But the throng who heard him gladly would in a short time cry out for His crucifixion.

But consider this...some of the people who Jesus cite David's psalm and apply it to Himself, also were standing now and hearing Peter cite the same verse also.

You see, the Holy Spirit needed to empower Peter. But the Spirit also needed to empower the people listening to him. For that to happen Peter had to preach and the crowd need to respond.

Many years later, Paul would write a very interesting passage to Titus and the church on the island of Crete. He wrote:

⁵ he [God] saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Let me read the main phrase again, ***"God saved us...by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit...."***

Is that the normal way we describe the cause of our salvation? Don't we normally say something like, "God saved us through the death of Christ on the cross for our sins"?

Was Paul preaching a different gospel here? Not at all. Paul was simply making a point; the value of the historical events of Christ's life—and specifically His death on the cross for our sins—was

made meaningful to us by the work, by the washing of regeneration of the Holy Spirit.

Here's the point: not only did the disciples need the Holy Spirit to empower them, the bewildered Jews who had gathered that morning needed the Holy Spirit to work powerfully among them too. Powerful preaching has less to do with technique, eloquence, or style than with God making the preaching effective in those who receive it...and that's the role the Holy Spirit plays.

The Final Question

Peter concludes his sermon simply:

³⁶ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

Being deeply convicted, the people asked not each other, but Peter, ***“Brothers, what shall we do?”***

The answer is straightforward, and found in verses 37-38. In short, repent (which is an act of faith) and be baptized. They were to have a new perspective on Christ...He was not a liar or a lunatic, a loser, He was their Lord.

Having done these things, they would also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Important to note, Peter does not say they will receive the gift of tongues.

III. The events of Pentecost brought the knowledge of God to the world.

Pentecost changed the world. The church has brought with her through the spread of the message of Christ:

Points of application:

1. We do not want to diminish Pentecost by suggesting we all should follow the pattern of the apostles. Notice at 2:43:

“And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.”

2. God’s normal way of working is not through miraculous signs. He typically reserves those for certain moment in his history when His message and His messengers need clear confirmation.

- Moses
- Elijah, Elisha
- Daniel
- Jesus
- The Apostles
- <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-dont-we-see-miracles/>

3. We need to know, as followers of Christ, that we have the Holy Spirit

¹³ ***“In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”*** (1:13-14).

What does this mean? See

There my friends is a miracle for you.

4. Scripture commands us to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ ***And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,***

- Not like the disciples were at Pentecost, but like the disciples were after Pentecost
- By giving of ourselves to God's will, His ways.