

The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-13

May 17 2009
HPC Evening Service

[Introduction]

Two weeks ago, I preached the second sermon of this Acts series “The Acts of the Risen Christ”, and my big idea was - **Jesus is always at work among us**. In the past couple of weeks, God has spoken very loudly to me that He is here at work. Two weeks ago Kevin and I went to the SMBC conference. One speaker who is an historian gave us a survey on the Great Awakenings in America and the movement of Billy Graham. His main point was that God is at work among us so don't be an “evangelical deist”! Remember from my last sermon I mentioned that Deism has strong influences in our worldview? We don't really believe wholeheartedly that **God is at work now**. I have to confess that I am an “evangelical deist”. I believe that God is here in theory but in my every day living I find I'm not consciously aware of His presence. I find it hard to wholeheartedly believe that God is with me all the time as I follow Him. And so, foolishly I depend on my own wisdom and strength more than His wisdom and strength and I try to “deal with” all the issues in my ministry without earnestly praying and seeking God.

Today I will continue this major theme as we look at the first part of ch.2 - the Day of the Pentecost. I am aware that there are many hot topics about the Holy Spirit such as speaking in tongues. You're probably interested in these topics and so I'll try to tackle this issue briefly tonight. However, I think we must see a big picture first before we get into the individual issues. Taking a step back and looking at the whole picture will give us a right perspective and it will be much easier to untie these tight knots. It's important to understand how God is working through history (past, present and future) so then we can better understand the significance of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which happened at the birth of the church. Hopefully this will help with some applications for us today.

Before we get into the passage, let's pray.

[Opening prayer]

Here is my observation - People today struggle with the fact that the church is outdated and old. The number of Christians is declining as our society is becoming increasingly secular and anti-Christian. Religion has no relevance in the community. As Christians we've become isolated as God's faithful remnants who believe the Truth. We are committed to evangelising the world to reach those who are lost. We mourn for the fact that the world is sinking so we need to rescue as many lost people as we can.

This is a pretty pessimistic approach, isn't it? Why do we think this way?

I think we know deep down that all things will eventually fall apart! Things aren't meant to last forever. Take for example material things - just last week I chucked out our rice cooker that we received as a wedding gift two years ago. It didn't last long at all. Things fall apart. They don't last long.

What about Our physical bodies? These too fall apart - sickness, fatigue, stress, depression take their toll. For over a year now I've been experiencing pain in my right arm from sitting in front of my computer all the time and lack of exercise. So recently I started getting physio treatment, but I still haven't seen any huge improvement. It's always an uphill battle to remain fit and healthy as we grow old. Even when I look at Caleb, full of joy and hope and potential, I know he's also under God's wrath and each day is one day closer to his death.

And what about relationships - they are broken by insensitivity, misunderstanding, anger, unfaithfulness, and deceit. We try to fix them through counseling and seminars and books, but no matter how hard we try to deal with them, relationships still fall apart. The brokenness is hard to repair. Even if healing can take place, scars still remain.

Things don't last. Everything falls apart.

Without God, everything is definitely going to fall apart. Remember in Ecclesiastes, everything is meaningless? Wisdom, pleasure, wealth, labor or justice are all meaningless. And eventually we all die.

It all seems pretty dim, doesn't it? But tonight I want to ask, have we let this pessimistic attitude impact the way we do church and how we approach evangelism?

If so, then our passage from Acts will help us to think differently. We read that in the last days, chaos will give way to order, wounds will be healed and wars will end. We will be fully reconnected with God. God will step into human history to set things straight in a world where everything seems to be falling apart. This work has started at the coming of Jesus the Saviour, and will be completed at His return. Before His ascension, He promised His disciples that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came. **The outpouring of the Spirit** is a foretaste, a first installment of the full restoration that awaits us when Christ returns. Because the Spirit gives us this foretaste of final redemption, He whets our appetite for the full feast.

Here, this biblical perspective sets the right context for us to grasp the significance of the event in chapter 2 - the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the Day of the Pentecost.

[Context] - Pentecost

Now, let's look more closely at today's passage. Keep your Bibles open. At v.1, it says "*When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.*" **Pentecost** is one of the three main festivals of Judaism. The other two are Passover and Tabernacles. It was ten days after Jesus' ascension, held 50 days after Passover. Originally, in Lev. 23, Pentecost celebrated the conclusion of the barley harvest. By the time of Jesus, it had an additional significance. It served as a memorial of the giving of the 10 Commandments, following the Passover which is to remember the redemption of the people from Egypt. Therefore, Pentecost was all about fulfillment and completion. In today's passage, the outpouring of the Spirit marks the completion of Christ's work and the birth of the church which is Jesus' body. It fits the special occasion - the great fulfillment occurs at Pentecost.

The structure of this sermon is very simple. Three signs that signal the Spirit's arrival:

1. The Wind of God (v.2)
2. The Tongues of Fire (v.3)
3. The Tongues of the Nations (vv.4-12)

As we go through them I will try to point out their significance. At the same time, I will touch on some of the more controversial issues. Then we will look at a few applications.

So, number one - **the Wind of God**.

In v.2, it says, "*Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.*" In the Bible, wind symbolizes God's Spirit. We are as dependent on the Spirit of life as we are on the breath in our lungs for physical life. As we just read ch.37 of Ezekiel - the vision of Israel as a valley full of skeletons, we have seen this vivid picture that the wind is to be breathed into the dead so they might live (Ezekiel 37:9-10). And God tells His

people through Ezekiel, *“I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.”* (Ezekiel 37:14). The word ‘Spirit’ in Hebrew can also be translated as ‘wind’. The resurrection that Ezekiel witnessed is a new creation of God’s people. Here the Spirit of God imparts life to the lifeless.

So, the sound of wind in v.2 really is to signify the arrival of the Spirit, who makes the dead alive. The wind of God is breathed into the new humanity. In view of Ezekiel’s vision, we can see that the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost marked a major step in God’s restoration of His creation in the last days.

The second sign is the Tongues of Fire.

In v.3, it says, *“They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.”* Fire is often used in the OT to signify God’s glorious presence. In the desert, the fire and cloud over the tent made God’s glory visible in the midst of Israel (Ex. 40:34-38). As the risen Christ poured out the Spirit, His followers were marked by this ‘pillar of fire’ on a small scale. Each was a temple where God dwelt by His Spirit.

The combination of the wind and the fire resting on the disciples showed that God was there. What Jesus had told them to wait for in ch. 1 was now happening. They were being baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

The third sign is the tongues of the nations.

v. 4, *“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”* The 120 were filled with the Spirit and started to speak in other dialects. At that time in Jerusalem, the Jewish pilgrims were from the 15 different areas listed in vv.9-11. At that time Jerusalem’s population was around 55,000, but during the festival, the influx could bring the number up to 200,000 or more. Here were these people from 15 different language groups hearing the languages of the 120 all declaring the wonders of God in their own mother tongues.

This miracle of languages marked a reversal of the brokenness in human language that began at Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). The world fell apart that day as God judged the people. He confused the rebellious people through creating all the different languages. People misunderstood each other, and became suspicious and frustrated with each other. Last year at the ESL training day here, I mentioned the story of Babel. Have you ever thought that the reason we have our Easy English ministry is because of the tower of Babel?

But now, Pentecost symbolizes the reversal of God’s judgment. God draws His people together from every nation under heaven, not to build another tower, but to glorify God for His salvation. The tongues of the nations are given to publicly proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ for the whole world. The power of the Spirit is given for a world-wide mission.

We must also notice that there is something new here. From now on, people don’t need to come to a central place and speak in one language to worship God. They don’t need to build up to the heavens in search of what they’ve lost when they were thrown out of the garden of Eden. God has sent the Spirit down to us.

Why is “speaking in tongues” such a hot topic?

I’ve got a commentary written by Peter Wagner, who is a Pentecostal scholar. I found it very helpful to read something from his perspective. According to Wagner, “speaking in tongues” wasn’t an issue until the Pentecostal movement in the 20th century, and it was resisted as well as scorned by more traditional Christians. Pentecostals were once listed by some theologians as a false cult, along with Jehovah’s Witnesses and Christian Scientists. Wagner also points out that within the Pentecostal

camp, some churches use tongues extensively yet others tend to discourage it, and most are in between. He argues that speaking in tongues is still one of the spiritual gifts for today's believers, and he testifies that he knows a monolingual British pastor who was able to pray in the Iranian language to convert a fellow Muslim.

Wagner considers that both speaking in tongues in private and in public are valid, however, in a public setting, it must be interpreted according to Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 14.

I think Wagner's view on this issue is reasonably fair. Personally, I don't doubt that God can give us the ability to speak in tongues **today**, because God is at work among us and He can do anything. The point is that God does this with a purpose. God's purpose is for us to proclaim the gospel worldwide. God can equip anyone in any miraculous ways to serve His purpose. When we look at a bigger picture and see speaking in tongues as a sign of the reversal of Babel, we can trust that God can use **any** means to break **any** barriers in order to reach His world that is falling apart. God can and will use **any** means to restore and renew His creation.

Applications

What is the significance of Pentecost for us today? What does this passage have to say to you and me?

I think there are three things God has taught us tonight:

Firstly, the outpouring of the Spirit fulfills what Jesus promised in John. Remember He promised He will be with us and in us (John 17:14)? We have the power of God through His Holy Spirit living within us. He is making us into a new person.

Secondly, as believers we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to serve God. Pentecost brought to the church a new power for witness.

Thirdly, Pentecost signals the breaking down of barriers that had separated us since Babel. A new gospel community has been established in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Pentecost reverses what happened at Babel.

As we bring these three points home, how will the truth of the Holy Spirit change the way we live and the way we evangelize?

There are three things I want to end on:

Firstly, intimacy with God and joy in worship

From my experience of teaching *Christianity Explained*, I found that many people think that they will believe only if they rationally read the gospel. Once becoming a Christian, they will follow the Bible as a manual book to live their lives as Christians. Of course I'm not denying the importance of reading the Bible and intellectual persuasion. But Luke in Acts 2 is telling us that there is something more. We need to have a **heart experience**. When God pours out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, our hearts should be filled with joy. When we truly have the Holy Spirit in us we'll know and feel and be deeply aware that God is at work among us.

We are allowed to get emotional, guys! At the SMBC Preaching Conference, one preacher had to stop his sermon half way to have a 'tissue break' as he was too emotional. Sometimes when I sing, tears just come out of my eyes, because I've experienced God in my life. When our song leaders ask us to sing loudly, they don't just want the music to be loud. They're encouraging you to express your joy in worship to God. Do you really know and love God with all your heart? How is this expressed?

Paul says in Eph. 5 “*Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord*”. Singing is one way that we can openly express our emotions to God and each other.

We need to constantly recapture the Spirit of Pentecost. Vibrant intimacy with God and our joyful worship should be an overflow of our heart. We're often critical towards Pentecostal theology, but one thing we **can** learn from our Pentecostal brothers and sisters is that they have brought back the heart and soul into worship. There are many good church examples that we can follow. For example The Sovereign Grace Ministry in the States. They have a strong evangelical emphasis in their teaching and also a truly Pentecostal emphasis on intimacy with God and vibrancy in worship. They have got the balance right between the head and heart.

I'm not just talking about Sunday worship here. Daily joy and intimacy with God comes from our personal holiness and knowing the Bible. It's possible for people to worship God with what seems to be deep intimacy on Sunday, yet they behave in very ungodly ways during the week. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit brings life-changing impact in all spheres of our life. And as we live out a godly life I believe this is the best way to do evangelism. Evangelism is not a rescue mission - a pessimistic way to approach non-Christians. Evangelism is to share the good news and bring a life-transforming experience to fallen sinners. Evangelism is to show how gracious God is in the new creation and to truly worship God with our heart, soul and mind so that others will be drawn to our God.

Secondly, experiencing the power of the Spirit today

The power demonstrated in Acts 2 is not the power of a magician that can be called up according to the will of any individuals. Sometimes we feel very weak and tired, we get sick, we feel depressed, and we feel God is far away. However, this doesn't mean that God doesn't supply enough power for us to do His ministry. In fact, power is often demonstrated in the opposite way. Yesterday Christine and I listened to a 37 year old mother's testimony. Rachel is dying. The cancer has spread everywhere in her body and she has been given 6 weeks to live. She said that her whole body is aching and her facial muscles are losing control, but as I looked at her, I couldn't tell that she is dying. She was full of joy as she was talking about her faith in Jesus and urging others to believe. Someone on her blog said that it was so clear the Spirit was dwelling in her and her words came with His power.

God's Spirit is at work in each of us - even in our weakness and failings. Will you pray for His power and presence even in situations that seem hopeless and difficult?

Thirdly, the breaking of barriers.

Tonight's passage tells us that Pentecost overcame the effects of Babel. The disciples used people's mother tongues to show God's wonders to them. When God's people come together, there is no more barriers. This is what the new heaven is about, isn't it? No more confusion from languages, no more suspicions between nations, no more tears, no more wars, no more death. The outpouring of the Spirit gives us a foretaste of this wonderful picture. We don't have to feel isolated as a minority Christian group overwhelmed by the pagan society around us. We don't have to be nerds who belong to a Christian sub-culture. We are part of the body of Jesus where all join together. As we reach out, we don't have to have a pessimistic mentality, attempting to rescue people from the pagan world to bring them into an isolated Christian community. We are meant to be the light and salt in the community. We are meant to be used as changing agents to transform the world. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit unites us, enables us to reach out, equips us to break down social barriers and bring people into a diversified gospel community.

This point is very applicable for us. HPC is challenged by the surrounding community yet at the same time we have huge outreach opportunities. We shouldn't expect all people to subject themselves to a

language like English. The work of the Holy Spirit allows us to touch people's hearts with their own mother tongues. We should appreciate more different cultures and values so we can affirm that we are one despite our cultural differences.

The signs on the Day of Pentecost display the new creation. Our Christian life is to be a preview of the world to come - a place of peace, purity, love and joy, even in the midst of the old creation's present pollution, decay, and death. The world is falling apart, but the Lord has restored it and through our witness, the love of God will overflow and fill people up with hope. This is the significance of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit for us today, and this is the positive approach we can take as we live out our lives to honour God.