



The Spirit of Power | The Spirit and Pentecost

Lesson 4

Christianity should never have gotten off the ground. The whole movement focused on the person of Jesus, a man who was publicly executed, came back to life, but then left just over a month later. What He left behind was a ragtag group of uneducated men who less than a month ago had fled in terror when their Master needed them the most. Humanly speaking, expectations should have been low. But on the next major feast in the Jewish calendar, this group showed up in Jerusalem and made quite the scene. They began speaking in tongues and powerfully preaching that Jesus was raised from the dead and all men must repent and believe in Him. And they refused to stop, even when threatened by the same authorities who had just crucified Jesus. What made the difference? The difference was that the Holy Spirit came. The difference was Pentecost.

In modern Christianity, "Pentecost" has unfortunately come to be associated with Pentecostalism. For that reason, some Christians shy away from that word or somehow feel like studying Pentecost puts them in someone else's territory. But Pentecost is a hugely important part of the beginning of Christianity, and we need to understand what happened there or we won't really understand what the church is or how the Holy Spirit works.

Why else are Christians afraid to talk about what happened on Pentecost?

What will happen if we don't think seriously about the role of the Spirit in the life of the church?

In this lesson we will study the coming of the Spirit upon those first followers and see what a difference that coming made for all of them. We will begin by looking at the Gospels, and there we will see that Jesus prepares His disciples by telling them that when He leaves they will receive the Spirit. Then we will see how the coming of the Spirit is described, and the immediate change that came over the disciples.

Jesus Promises to Send the Spirit

John the Baptist had predicted that the one who was coming after him would "baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16). But John wasn't the only one who made this prediction. Jesus Himself highlighted at several points in His ministry that He would send the Spirit.

Jesus Predicts the Coming Spirit

One question many people ask is why Jesus didn't stay around. After all, He was raised from the dead and is alive today, so why did He have to leave? Why not stay on earth with us? This was a question Jesus anticipated His followers asking one day, and so He gave an answer: It was better for Him to leave, so that He could send the Spirit (John 16:7). Throughout John 14-16 Jesus repeatedly declares in one form or another that He will send the Spirit (John 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7). Having lived by the power of the Spirit and overcome death itself by the Spirit, Jesus becomes the one who gives the Spirit freely to all who believe in Him (John 7:37-39).

Many people understandably still wish they could see and touch Jesus today. Why is it better that we have the help of the Spirit? What do we have that even the disciples didn't have as they lived with Jesus Himself?

Jesus Instructs on the Coming Spirit

After His resurrection Jesus told the disciples that they should go to Jerusalem and to wait until He sent the Spirit (Acts 1:4-5). This was no doubt a surprise for them. After all, they were expecting Jesus to set up an earthly kingdom with Jerusalem as the capital and all of them as rulers. In fact, they asked Him: "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) Jesus's doesn't deny that He will one day set up a kingdom (spoiler alert: He will!), but He wants their attention to be on waiting for the Spirit so that they can be witnesses (Acts 1:7-8).

The implication seems pretty clear: the disciples would not be ready to be the witnesses they needed to be until they had some help, serious help! A careful study of the book of Acts will highlight the work of the Spirit again and again in the life of the young church. The story of Acts is not the story of a group of incredible people doing the impossible, it's the story of God taking a bunch of otherwise ordinary and unexpected people and doing the extraordinary through them. If the disciples had just charged ahead without the Spirit, their work would have been a disaster. But they waited, and the Spirit came, and the church was born.

What would it look like for us, who have been given the Spirit, to "charge ahead without the Spirit" in our lives and ministry?

How often do we do this?

How can we rely more consciously on the Spirit?

The Coming of the Spirit at Pentecost

Once Jesus was resurrected and ascended, all that was left to do was wait for the Spirit. When the Spirit did come, though, there was no missing it. God made sure that something as dramatic as the coming of God to dwell in man came with all the attention it deserved.

Why do you think God would desire a dramatic appearance of the Spirit of God coming upon the disciples?

Several things happened when the Spirit came upon the first believers. The sound of a mighty wind filled the room, and small tongues of fire appeared over the heads of the disciples. While this passage might be a little confusing, there are several important wordplays going on here that are designed to help us understand what is happening. This was a crucial moment in the life of the church, the moment when the Spirit finally came upon the disciples as Jesus had predicted. And while we might be confused about what was happening, it was all important and significant.

A Great Wind Fills the Room (Acts 2:2)

First a loud sound like a mighty wind fills the room (2:2). In the Old Testament the word for Spirit is *ruach*, and it can mean spirit, breath, or wind. The New Testament word for Spirit is *pneuma*, and it too can mean spirit, breath, or wind. Although there is a slightly different word used for wind in this verse (*pnoe*), the idea is still related – the mighty rushing wind filling the house represents the mighty rushing Spirit filling the disciples.

What are some of the connections between the Spirit, the wind, and breath?

Now, Luke doesn't say that a wind filled the house. He said that the sound as of a mighty wind filled the house. We are dealing with a supernatural occurrence here, and the biblical authors are doing their best to describe something that has never been seen before or since. The mighty wind filling the room was meant to show that the Spirit had arrived and was filling the individual believers. Part of the reason for this is so that it was clear what was happening. Jesus said that the Spirit would come upon the disciples, and with the dramatic events taking place it was clear that the time was now.

Divided Tongues of Fire Sit on the Disciples (Acts 2:3)

As with the wind, what came on the disciples was not fire, but it was something that looked very much like fire. Fire is often a picture of the presence of God in the Old Testament.

Can you think of any times when the presence of God is represented with fire in the Old Testament?

The covenant God made with Abraham represented God with fire (Genesis 15), when Moses met with God it began with a burning bush (Exodus 3), the children of Israel followed a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21), and when He came to meet with the people at Sinai there was fire (Exodus 19:18). All of this means that when the Spirit came and rested upon them as divided tongues of fire, it was to show that God Himself was coming down upon them.

The fact that this fire is described as "tongues" is a hint as to what is coming, but why are the tongues "cloven" or "divided"? The picture here teaches that there is one Spirit who is a consuming fire, but that fire is divided up and manifests itself on each of the individual disciples. This emphasizes that it was the same Spirit in all of them, and that they were therefore all united in one Spirit. Paul makes a similar statement when he later encourages unity among the divided Corinthians because we "have been all made

to drink into one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13). While Paul is there speaking of Jew/Gentile unity, the principle applies more broadly.

If we are united in the Holy Spirit, why is there division among God’s people?

The Disciples Speak in Tongues

The immediate result of the Spirit’s coming upon the disciples is that they all begin speaking in tongues. While many who want to argue for the ongoing use of tongues will eagerly point to this passage, the problem with such a comparison is that these were clearly known languages (2:5-12). In fact, it was crucial to God’s mission that these be known languages, since the point was to show that something supernatural was happening. If the disciples had left the upper room babbling incoherently in a language known only to heaven, then everyone would have simply thought they were crazy. Although that accusation was still made (2:13), it’s a whole lot harder to explain away people speaking actual languages they’d never learned. The overwhelming response to this message (2:41) shows that those mocking and calling the disciples drunk weren’t very persuasive.

Why does God not still help Christians speak in languages they had never learned? Would more people get saved if He did?

The Disciples Testify to Christ

But speaking in tongues was not the main result of being Spirit-filled. Jesus did not say, “The Spirit will come on you and you will speak in tongues,” but rather “the Spirit will come upon you and you will be my witnesses.” At the end of the coming of the Spirit and the speaking in tongues comes the most important part – the verbal proclamation of the gospel of Jesus. One of the sad things about much of the charismatic movement is that it draws attention away from Jesus and the message of the gospel. What is supposed to be front and center ends up being replaced. The proclamation of the gospel is sidelined for so-called manifestations of the Spirit.

On Pentecost what we see is that the purpose of the dramatic filling of the Spirit was to set up Peter and his message. In fact, 13 verses describe the coming of the Spirit (2:1-13), and the next 27 are devoted to the preaching of the gospel (2:14-40). The role of the Spirit is to magnify Christ (John 16:14), and so if we begin to ignore Christ to focus on the Spirit, we are getting something wrong.

In Acts the Spirit is often associated with the bold proclamation of the gospel. In what ways do we need boldness today and how can the Spirit help with that?

What happened on Pentecost was unique, and that specific, dramatic coming of the Spirit has not been repeated. But God was putting an exclamation point on the coming of the Spirit, and for those who worry they might have missed it God made it clear that this Spirit was available to all (2:38).

Why do you think God no longer has such a dramatic display when someone gets saved and is given the Holy Spirit?

A lot changed when the Spirit came, and a lot happens now when someone first trusts Christ for salvation and receives the Holy Spirit. We'll take the next few lessons to unpack all that started that day at Pentecost.