# Acts - III

Acts 2:1-21

## Introduction

In these verses we have the details of what happened on the Day of Pentecost 2,000 years ago. Next week we will consider Peter’s sermon and the week after, what the consequences of this outpouring were for that early church community. For today, however, we will concentrate on the events and phenomena that marked that amazing day.

As we look at these events, I want us to give some thought to each of the phenomena encountered in the passage and what the outcome of these things was for the people in Jerusalem. We will then see the context in which Peter puts these things.

## They were all together in one place

v.1

In the Greek, the word translated together means more than just alongside one another. It also means ‘of one accord’. Thus, we find out, right at the beginning of this passage, that those believers were not just in the same place, but they were also in unity with one another.

If we want to see God move powerfully amongst us, we need to be in unity. Psalm 133 tells us that it is when we are in unity that God ‘commands the blessing’. Part of the purpose of the cross was to bring reconciliation, both with God and with one another. It does damage to the body of Christ when God’s people are out of harmony with one another.

Each one of us needs to guard our hearts and not speak ill of another brother or sister. We need to speak positively and keep from allowing the enemy to get a foothold between us. We need to guard our relationships. As we do so, we build a platform for God to bless us.

Too much of church history has been typified by Christians falling out with one another over minor issues. It is time for us to realise that the Body of Christ is more important than our egos or our individual preferences. The Body of Christ is the means that Jesus himself has left for his reconciling message to be made known to the world.

‘How good and pleasant is when brothers (the people of God) dwell together in unity.’

## A violent wind

v.2

The word for ‘spirit’ (*ruach /* *pneuma*) also means ‘wind’ or ‘breath’. Not surprisingly, when the Holy Spirit turned up powerfully on that day, they heard the sound of a rushing wind.

At one time, I had in my possession a cassette recording of when the Holy Spirit fell on the Inuit people about 20 years ago. What you hear is a sound like a jet engine roaring. They experienced the same phenomenon as these early Christians. So why wind?

In John 3:8, Jesus likens the Spirit to the wind and suggests that the wind is something we cannot control. In the same way, it is not for us to determine how and when the Spirit will come or will act in a person’s life. The Spirit moves according to the sovereign will of God and is not under our control.

It was the *Ruach* of God that was ‘hovering over the waters’ in Genesis 1:2 who was the creative energy of God in forming the universe. It was the *Ruach* of God who separated the Red Sea before the People of Israel in Exodus 14:21. It was the *Ruach* of God that enabled Bezalel to make the tabernacle according to the divine pattern in Exodus 31:1-5. It was the *Ruach* of God that came upon Israel’s elders to enable them to lead the people in Numbers 11:27-29. We could go on... The *Ruach* of God is his creative life force who brings about the divine will. We cannot and should not try to command the Spirit. He is God’s Spirit and will fulfil God’s will as he chooses. All we can do is ask fro him to move amongst us and do his work.

Returning to Acts 2, it is the *Ruach* of God whom the early believers encountered that day as they gathered, who changed these timid believers into those who would go on to turn the world upside down. I am sure they were not expecting their promised spirit-baptism to be quite like this, but we cannot predict how God will act. He is sovereign.

## Tongues

The first phenomenon that day was the sound of a rushing wind. The second was fire. This fulfilled the prophecy of John the Baptist who declared that Jesus would be the one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire in Matthew 3:11, and we see the Holy Spirit alighting on each person and appearing as a tongue of fire on each of their heads.

This contrasts with the anointing of Jesus with the Holy Spirit. When Jesus was anointed for ministry by the Holy Spirit in Matthew 3:16, the Holy Spirit came upon him as a dove and the Father spoke his commendation over him: ‘This is my beloved some in whom I am well pleased’. When the Holy Spirit came upon the early believers, he came as fire. Why? Because part of the Spirit’s work within us is to refine us and to cleanse us.

Throughout scripture, fire speaks of refining. That which survives the fire is that which is valuable and worth preserving. In the same way, as the Holy Spirit does his work in us, he will burn off the dross and enable us to be refined so that we become like Jesus.

Has this phenomenon been seen since? Yes, in the Indonesian revival of the 1950s, when the Holy Spirit fell upon the believers there, onlookers thought the roof of the church was on fire. I am sure it has been seen elsewhere as well. Similar to the burning bush that Moses saw (Exodus 3:2), the flame that alighted on the head of the believers did not set them on fire. It was a symbol that the Holy Spirit had come upon them.

Next, in 2:4, we see the believers receiving the gift of tongues. I believe it is not necessarily helpful for us to refer to this gift as ‘tongues’ as it makes it sound a bit weird. Whilst the Greek word (*glossa*) does in fact literally mean ‘tongue’, it was used widely in the ancient world simply to indicate ‘language’. Coupled with the word *laos*, it simply means ‘languages of people’. What it indicates here is that the early believers received the ability to speak in languages that they had never learned, and that it was the Spirit who gave them this ability.

From vv.7-11, we know that many of the languages were understood by those who were around in Jerusalem at that time from many different nations. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:1 that this gift of languages can incorporate both human languages and angelic languages. It is the Holy Spirit who determines which language each believer receives.

So, what did those who were listening hear? V.11 tells us that they heard ’them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues’. I believe this is the primary use of this gift – it is a gift of praise and of prayer. It is given to the believer to express their praise and thanksgiving to God and to seek his face. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 14:2 that ‘anyone who speaks in an unknown language does not speak to people but to God’. Although some of the bystanders on the day of Pentecost could understand what was being said, it was not directed towards them but towards God himself.

When the gift of languages was first heard again after many year’s absence in the 1830s under the ministry of Edward Irving, many, including Irving himself, thought that this gift had been given to go and evangelise overseas. That, however, is not its purpose. Pauls goes on in 1 Corinthians 14:4 to tell us that the purpose of this gift is to build up the believer. In other words, as I speak in the language God has given me, and give praise and thanksgiving to God, it will build up my spirit in just the same way as when I sing a song of praise to God.

Praise is good for you. Worship brings you into an encounter with the living God. When I speak in the language God has given me, it has the same effect because it is my spirit worshipping God with words given by the Holy Spirit.

Paul goes on to suggest that speaking in tongues in church is not very helpful for the rest of the congregation unless someone interprets. Then, everyone can join in with my praise and worship or my prayer because they will understand what I have been saying. What about when we sing in tongues? It would be ideal if everybody could join in with that song in their own Spirit-given language and then everyone would be built up together.

Do we understand what we are saying when we speak in our language? The answer is no. Again, in 1 Corinthians 14:14, Paul tells us that ‘if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful’. In other words, I do not know what I am saying but God’s Spirit does. Thus, Paul encourages us to pray in our own language, English in our case, and to pray in tongues. He also tells us that we should sing in tongues and sing in our own language, English, as well.

So, what about those who say such gifts ceased with the Apostles? Well I am afraid that is just prejudicial misinterpretation of scripture. It is based on 1 Corinthians 13:8 that says that tongues and prophecy will cease ‘when the perfect comes’. This is interpreted as being when the Bible was assembled in 325AD. However, the perfect is not here referring to the Bible, but to Jesus. He is the only one who is perfect and, when he returns, then there will no longer be a need for the supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit because God himself will be amongst us.

In actual fact, this notion is also not true historically. There have been reports of ecstatic utterances throughout the history of the church including the Montanists, Hildegard of Bingen, the Prophets of Cevennes (Camisards who were French Protestant Huguenots), the Anabaptists, the Irvingites, at Tirunelveli in India in 1860s, and others. This phenomenon has never ceased, but it has become more widespread since the breakout of the Pentecostal movement from Azusa Street in 1906.

## What was the reaction?

Firstly, we are told (v.12) the bystanders were ‘amazed and perplexed’. Essentially, they heard them speaking in languages from, not just the Roman world, but from way beyond the borders of the Empire in all directions of the compass. There is no way these Galileans could have known such a wide range of languages.

In Greek, the root of ‘amazed’ is ‘ecstatic’, and the of ‘perplexed’ is ‘in great wonderment’. In our modern idiom, we might say, ‘they were gobsmacked’. What they could not work out was how these uneducated rustics were speaking in these foreign languages and so fluently. The question on their lips was, ‘how could this possibly happen?’ Thus, some thought they were drunk, although I have never heard a drunk person on a Saturday night in the centre of Beverley suddenly speaking fluently in a foreign language. Essentially, these bystanders were trying to make sense of what they were hearing as they listened to the believers praising God in different languages.

In a very real way, this was a reversal of the Tower of Babel. There, different languages were given to divide peoples in order that they would cease their rebellion against God. Here, languages were given to reunite people back to God by making known his excellencies.

Once more, it was down to Peter to take the lead and bring some understanding to the crowds about what was going on. His immediate point of reference was the Old Testament. Clearly, he had some knowledge of the scriptures and he delved back into his memory banks and recalled the prophecies of Joel concerning the pouring out of the Spirit.

In the book of Joel, this particular prophecy comes as an ‘afterwards’ to the prophecies of judgement on Israel that have preceded it, and as a prelude to the restoring of the fortunes of Israel and the judgement of the nations that follows it. Quite rightly, Peter picks out the fact that, with the fulfilment of this prophecy, the salvation of God was being poured out on ‘all who call on the name of the Lord’, and that we are now living in the in-between time before the Lord himself returns and brings justice to the earth.

This was to be a time when the supernatural phenomena of prophecy, visions and dreams would be poured out on all who name the name of the Lord. It does not matter today whether you are a man or a woman, an old person or a young person, God wants to pour out his Spirit upon you and bring to you and through you his supernatural revelation. You will know if you are young or old by whether you see visions or dream dreams!

He goes on to say that this supernatural visitation of the Spirit to the earth, is the prelude to the ‘great and glorious day of the Lord’. We need to hear this as a Jew of the 1st Century would hear it. From a Jewish perspective there were only two phases in history: the present age and the age to come. The dividing marker was the Day of the Lord – the Day when God himself would come to earth and bring his salvation. What they could not see that there are two parts to that day which are divided by the time in which we now live. The Day of the Lord came when Jesus came to earth to win for us our salvation through his cross and resurrection. The Day of the Lord is coming when he returns to complete the work. We live in the in-between time when Jesus has sent his Holy Spirit to the earth to continue the work that he has started until he returns to complete it. That is why the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost. He is given that we might be ‘witnesses’ to the great salvation of our God, and the supernatural gifts are given in order to help us make that salvation known and to build up the church.

## Conclusion

As I conclude, I want to encourage everyone again to ensure they have an encounter with the Holy Spirit. I believe God does want to release spiritual gifts amongst us, not as an end in themselves, but to enable us and to equip us to get the job done. If you’ve never spoken in tongues or prophesied, seek God for these gifts, as well as the others listed in 1 Corinthians 12, as Paul says, ‘especially that you may prophesy’ (1 Corinthians 14:1). That way, when we come together, ‘each of you has a hymn or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation’ (1 Corinthians 14:26), in order to build up the church.

Next week we will look at the content of Peter’s sermon and the impact it had on his audience.