

“First Fruits of Pentecost”

6/09/19; Acts 2:14-41

by Rev. Steve Hammond for FBC of Newport, NH

//36 “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

38 Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. //

—Acts 2:36-41 (NIV)

Pentecost is a weird holiday. We get Christmas; it’s a birthday. We get Palm Sunday; it’s a parade with people waving flag-like palm branches as Jesus enters Jerusalem. Okay, Maundy Thursday is a weird name, but we get-it in terms of it being the first Last Supper. Good Friday also takes us back a bit, being called “good” and all. But we still get-it because it’s about Jesus dying on the cross. And Easter is pretty straightforward (once you get past the silly bunny thing). Easter is Resurrection Day, pure and simple.

But Pentecost is different. It’s complicated. It’s foreign. It’s like having a holiday from another planet. It’s got wind, tongues of flame that look like fire but aren’t really fire, and people speaking foreign languages. It also has in its background a fifty day countdown from the Passover’s liberation of the Jews from Egypt to their receiving of the Law through Moses at Mt. Sinai. Oh, and Pentecost is also about celebrating the first fruits of the new year’s early harvest. It’s not a birthday. It’s not a parade. It’s not a supper. It’s not a day of death or of life. It’s a weird holiday.

It’s weird though for a reason. It’s a pre-holiday. It’s about things to come, before they’ve completely come. It’s like celebrating the Fourth of July before the fourth of July—even before 1776. It’s like celebrating your fiftieth wedding anniversary while you and your spouse are but engaged.

You see, with Christmas, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and even Easter we are observing important events and dates that are primarily focused on the earthly point of view. Jesus is born, Jesus enters Jerusalem, Jesus shares the Last Supper, Jesus dies, Jesus rises from the dead. But Pentecost is only partly about what has happened here on earth. It is very much about what has happened in heaven. There is where Christ ascended to the very throne of God. There is where he received the Holy Spirit of God. Imagine the power and fullness of that Spirit as he is able to express Himself according to

heaven's view of the completed work of Christ on the Cross, in the glorious resurrection, and in all the Gospel Story illuminated in this victory of God through Jesus Christ! Well, Pentecost is where the reality of God and heaven's Holy Spirit is sent from heaven—to earth—independently of the usual constraints of human timelines, dates, experiences and legal red tape.

To give us one more image, appropriate to this time of year, Pentecost would be like telling all the Allied troops after D-Day to stay at the beaches in Normandy, wait fifty days and then send them the spirit of V-day and tell them to now go into all of Europe and defeat the enemy.

Pentecost is a pre-holiday. It is weird. But it is more wonderful than it is weird. You can see this in many of the details of Joel's prophecy. This pouring out of God's Spirit is a sign of the "last days." Prophetic truth will be commonly expressed, not just through select men of God, but through sons and daughters, young men and old, men and women. Signs and wonders will be in both the heavens above and the earth below, preceding the "great and glorious day of the Lord." And best of all, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Pentecost is the fullness of Christ, God and the Gospel sent to us here on earth, even as it already is celebrated in heaven, where Jesus, in the line of King David, already reigns upon the throne of God.

With this in mind, I would like us to take a close look at the First Fruits of Pentecost. The 120 disciples and Apostles gathered in Jerusalem were the first to receive the Holy Spirit on that first day of Pentecost, and often we focus on their experience, for it was remarkable, miraculous and noteworthy. But they themselves would be the harvesters, not the first fruits. The first fruits would be those first people to hear the Gospel message, receive it through ears that hear and in hearts of good soil, and are saved. And, as promised, would receive the Gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

Who were these people? What happened to them? And what can we learn from them? Let's look at the text of Acts 2: 24-41 and see.

1. They were believers in God.

*//14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd:
"Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you...//*

These were "fellow Jews." These were not the "Gentile dogs," which one might assume needs to be saved, and might also assume doesn't really want to be saved. These were people who not only believed in God but they occupied much of their lives trying to do the will of God by way of the law and sacrifices. They were raised on this stuff. It was their history, their day to day living and their future. And yet, these are the one's to whom Peter first preached the Gospel.

So, to make a comparison for us today, we need only to look around us. The first people to hear the Gospel and receive the Holy Spirit today would be the people already going to church, already going to Sunday School and Bible Study, already singing in the choir or praise team. This is not to say it is

automatic, nor is it to say all such people are receptive of what they hear. But it is worth pointing out that believing in God, going to church, or temple, or synagogue, and participating in other good, religious activities does not mean there is no need for the Gospel to be heard and believed.

Now that the Gospel has been established by Jesus, everyone needs to hear it, everyone should believe it, everyone needs the salvation it offers—starting with those who are already religious and believe in God. Don't be fooled by the appearance of religion, any religion, even the Christian religion. For God's plan all along has been to save us from mere appearances, mere outward conformity to the law and ritual, even if they are true and good. Our hearts can still be wrong and in need of salvation. There are no exceptions to this.

2. They respected the Scriptures.

//16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 17 “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.” (This is from Joel 2:-28-32. He also references Psalm 16 and 110.)

I put that first point negatively. But it's worth noting that those “fellow Jews” were indeed the first to hear. And, for three thousand of them, they were the first to believe. But I think the negative side was important to emphasize, so no one is falsely complacent.

Here, though, I want this second point to be seen as positive. Since this crowd already accepted the scriptures as the word of God, Peter was able to take them directly to the truth of what was going on there in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost: this was God's Spirit at work; Jesus was the Jewish Messiah; and though he had been crucified (by them), God had raised him from the dead and Jesus was seated at the right hand of God. They already had the perfect background for understanding these things. And their respect for the scriptures gave them a head-start for putting the picture together and believing it.

This is not a bad thing at all.

Nor is it a bad thing for a person to be raised up in the church and to get a head start in reading the Bible and even respecting it as the word of God. These things, though they do not in and of themselves save anyone, nevertheless they can point the way to that salvation when employed in the light of the Gospel of Christ.

Much then depends on what will be done with that light. What will be the response to it? People can go two ways. Reliance on the scriptures can bring one to believe in Christ and then the Word of God can be joined with the Holy Spirit of God! And in this way God can counsel and guide us like never before, for the rest of our life on Earth.

Or, that light can be rejected. Even to the point where a person grows up in the church and they become jaded or even embittered by bad experiences, maybe even immune to the Gospel.

What did these first hearers of the Gospel do at Pentecost?

3. They were convicted as serious sinners.

//23 This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.//

And later in his sermon, Peter drives home the point by saying,

//36 "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."//

This sounds terrible. But it's not. It's wonderful.

One drawback of being an Israelite, with all the rich history of God at work in their midst since Abraham, the Law of Moses, and the word of the prophets, was the temptation to believe that they were better than the people surrounding them, the Gentiles, the Romans, and of course the sinners and traitorous tax collectors.

But this was addressed at Pentecost by the Gospel. Peter's preaching drove home the point that this Jesus, who was accredited by God to these Jews by miracles, wonders and signs, was also crucified—by these same Jews. I don't know how direct a hand they had in it. I suppose there could have been some in that crowd who very much had a direct say in the matter. Others could have been in the crowd crying, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Still others could have merely watched as Jesus walked through the crowded streets of Jerusalem and thought to themselves that he must have been getting what he deserved. Whatever involvement it was, this Pentecostal Gospel was pointing hearts to the true conviction that there is nothing more serious than sin. And there is no sin more serious than the killing of God in the crucifixion of his Anointed One.

Peter repeated his point. And what did the listeners do? They listened. And they let this convicting word of God go deep into their hearts. To the point where they were "cut to the heart." In this way their hearts were also wide open for repentance and God's word of forgiveness and the receiving of the Gift of God's Holy Spirit.

This led them, and should lead us, to this last point ...

4. They were invited to call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

By Joel: //21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.//

And by Peter: //37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" 38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.//

This invitation is to everyone who hears it. And its power and Holy Spirit is for everyone who believes it. This isn't always the result, though. And Pentecost itself reminds us of this truth.

Pentecost points back to the day when Moses received the Law from God at Mt. Sinai and there we see a different result. There we find God's judgment against the Israelites who worshipped the golden calf while waiting for Moses to return from that holy mountain. The number of Israelites killed in judgment at that first Pentecost, according to Exodus 32:28, was, and I quote: "about three thousand." Which interestingly is the same phrase used in our text counting the

number of Israelites given life at the second Pentecost. It says in Acts 2:41 “and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” As Paul would later write, “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

And Jonathan Cahn goes on with this connection, saying:

“The Spirit was given on the same day as the Law [Pentecost]. Why? Because the Law can tell us the will of God, but only the Spirit can give us the power to live it. Therefore, live by the Spirit of God and you fulfill the will of God for your life just as precisely as the coming of the Spirit on Shavuot, Pentecost, the Day of the Law.”
—*The Book of Mysteries, day 110.*

Though God is justified in the law to bring judgment upon all of us for our serious sin against him, thank God for his grace in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And thank God for the gift of his Holy Spirit able to fill us with the fullness and power of that truth when we believe it.

In stark contrast to the way in which the giving of the Law brought judgment and death to 3,000 Israelites, the first fruits of the giving of the Gospel of grace and the Holy Spirit at Pentecost were these 3,000 Israelites believing in their Messiah, Jesus Christ. From there they returned to their homes in various places throughout the Roman empire, taking their faith with them. For there would be a much larger harvest yet to come throughout the world.

Pentecost is not just another religious holiday. It is a Holy Day. And it comes from heaven’s calendar where there is but one Great Day of the Lord. This is our pre-holiday experience of that truth.

Pentecost is not a day for simply looking back at history. It is a day where His Story comes alive in the hearts of people who are themselves made alive in Christ. This was true first of those 3,000 Jews. But it has kept on being true of Jews and Gentiles, men and women, young and old, ever since that 50th day after Passover. One day it will culminate in a great and glorious harvest of true believers in Jesus Christ from all over the world.

Pentecost is an invitation for everyone to believe in him and be saved. For everyone ... *everyone* needs such a Savior. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.