

ACTS: NOT BY OUR STRENGTH

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Acts 2: 1-41

You've got to love that crazy story. It's one of many in the Bible where God just won't behave himself. He won't act like he's supposed to act. Like every great story, the Pentecost story is exciting, disturbing, and ultimately, profoundly uplifting.

Today we're going to look at what Acts chapter 2 reveals about the Holy Spirit. A little later we'll look at the big picture and try and relate the story to our life today. But for now let's look at some of the wonderfully weird details.

Ten days have passed since Jesus ascended to heaven. The eleven faithful disciples, and probably many other Jesus followers, have been hanging together in the upper room of a large house in Jerusalem. The Risen Lord had told them to wait together in Jerusalem. He reminded them that he would be sending the Spirit promised by the Father. "When the Holy Spirit comes to you," he told them, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Lee talked about that time of waiting last week.

Suddenly the Holy Spirit shows up – *inside the room* – with manifestations of wind and flame. (Apparently God doesn't understand the dangers associated with oxygen-fed conflagrations in packed rooms.) The Spirit falls on each of the Apostles. Tongues of fire lick the air above their heads. They call out to each other, but astonishingly, they find themselves speaking in other languages. Each one speaks a different tongue, and each one understands that tongue, but none of the others.

Hoping to make themselves understood, the Apostles raise their voices, and pretty soon they're all practically screaming. This unruly commotion attracts the attention of people in the streets, first a few, then dozens, then many hundreds. Most of the people in the crowd aren't locals. They're Jews who have gathered in Jerusalem for the Pentecost holiday. They've traveled long distances to be there and they speak a wide variety of languages. And as those visitors listen to the din created by the Apostles, they begin to realize that at least one of the disciples is speaking in their native tongue.

The scene is alarmingly disorderly, and embarrassingly undignified. I mean, imagine how y'all would respond if Lee Cook was preaching and his thinning hair suddenly appeared to catch fire. I'm pretty sure the ushers would be all over him with a fire extinguisher. Or imagine if I started speaking Korean, and Gary/ Dan started speaking Armenian, and 10 of you started speaking in 10 other languages you didn't know. The rest of you would probably make a beeline your cars. And like some of those who heard the Apostles preach for the first time in Jerusalem, some of you would wonder if we'd had wine instead of coffee for breakfast. The video clips would be all over Instagram and Facebook within 15 minutes.

If I'd been in charge of that Pentecost crusade, I probably would have uninvited the Holy Spirit. The wind, the inexplicable fire, the incoherent babbling – those things may attract a crowd, but how are they supposed to draw people to God? My strategy would be to engage people where they are and get them talking about their personal needs and aspirations. I'd set up a booth where people could get bottled water and free hugs. I'd print up a color brochure in a dozen translations. On the cover there'd be a picture of a radiant Jesus busting out of the tomb. Inside there'd be a simple illustrated message explaining God's three step plan of salvation. Above all, I'd do my best not to offend anyone. For example, I'd try to avoid the whole messy question of the Lord's crucifixion, and who was responsible for it. My message would be: "Whoever you are, and whatever you may have done in the past: God loves you and forgives you. Jesus died on the cross and rose from the tomb so your sins could be washed clean."

Actually, I'm not sure what I would have done to carry out the departed Lord's commission to make disciples of every nation on the planet. But I doubt if any of us would have been excited about God's plan of making the team look and sound like a bunch of lunatics and threatening to burn down the city.

It's hard to submit to the Spirit. He's constantly challenging our ideas about who God is and what he's trying to accomplish. Worse than that, the Spirit sometimes entices and prods and cajoles us into doing things that, from a worldly perspective, seem dangerous or downright crazy. His vision for Christ's Church sometimes seems completely unrealistic. His mission strategy often seems fatally flawed.

For all these reasons, we have to fight the tendency, as Christians, get out in front of the Spirit or push him aside. We have to make the decision every day to walk in the Spirit regardless of where he decides to lead us. Because if our main goal in life is to stay within our comfort zone, our work is always going to be uninspired and our witness is always going to be weak. I love the way Elisabeth Elliot makes the point. She writes:

The will of God is not something you add to your life. It's a course you choose. You either line yourself up with the Son of God...or you capitulate to the principle which governs the rest of the world.

I'm sure that all of that and more is going through the minds of the disciples as they face the huge crowd that has gathered and the hecklers start in on them. They had good reason to worry that the authorities would do to them what they had done to Jesus. Yet when Peter begins to speak, their doubts and fears melt away. They realize, in that moment, that the Spirit that lives in them will never lead them astray. They see more clearly than ever that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and that they must speak of him regardless of how people respond.

Peter's message is more than inspired. It's utterly audacious. He begins by quoting from the prophet Joel. He cites a passage from the second chapter where God promises to unleash his Spirit on men and women, young and old. God says:

“I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams...

“I will show wonders in the heavens
and on the earth...

“And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

- Acts 2:17-21 (see Joel 2:28-32)

Peter’s audience is familiar with these words, which were written, at the earliest, in the fifth century before Christ. In accordance with the teachings of the rabbis, the people believed that the Holy Spirit had departed from Israel with the last of the prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. More depressing still, they believed that God’s glory – his *shekinah* – was absent from the Second Temple. So Peter knows the people yearn for God to speak and act through a new generation of prophets. He knows the people long to see the glories of the original temple. And he taps into this tremendous sense of nostalgia when he quotes Joel: “I will pour out my Spirit on all people...”

What Peter is saying is that the long-awaited day has come. In the distant past God’s Spirit came and went like the wind. Over the past few centuries God’s Spirit was silent and even eerily absent. But not anymore. From this day forth, Peter declares, the Spirit will be given to anyone who hears God word, and truly repents, and is baptized in the name of Jesus.

Up to this point the message has been spellbinding. Peter’s audience is eating out of his hand. They’ve just seen and heard overwhelming evidence of the Spirit’s presence. If Peter knows anything about preaching, he’ll realize that it’s time to put a bow on his message. It’s time to tell the people that God loves them and has a wonderful plan for their life, and then invite them to receive Jesus as their personal Savior.

Fortunately for his audience and for us, Peter is a rough, ill-prepared fisherman from the sticks who has to rely on the Spirit for guidance. And the Spirit doesn’t give Peter a sugar-coated message about cheap grace. Instead, he gives him a harsh message about the need for repentance.

Peter doesn’t hesitate to smack the people with a two-by-four. “Look,” he says, “you all knew about the miracles, signs and wonders that Jesus performed. If you didn’t see them yourselves you heard about them from friends. All of those things confirmed that Jesus had been sent to us from God. Yet instead of listening to him, you crucified him. Instead of worshipping him as the Messiah, you spurned him, beat him, spit on him, and tried to destroy him.”

At this point the Spirit does something that makes the day’s previous miracles seem trivial by comparison. He touches the heart of every listener and helps them to see the ghastly truth: They’re all

guilty of murdering Israel's Messiah. They all stand utterly condemned before God. And instead rejecting Peter's message and lashing out at him, every one of them is cut to the quick.

"Brothers, what shall we do?" they ask. Now they're truly desperate. They want to know if there's anything at all they can do to escape the judgment they so richly deserve. They're begging the Apostles to give them a reason to hope.

Peter replies: "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" (Acts 2:38). And at that very moment God fulfills the prophecy spoken by Joel, that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21). About 3,000 people turn from their sin and surrender their lives to Christ. In baptism, they all receive the long-awaited Holy Spirit. And with that, the revolution begins.

Before we leave the story, let's look again at the ending. Two amazing things happen after Peter finishes speaking. First, the Spirit is poured out on every new believer – all 3,000 of them. That's further confirmation of God's promise given through the prophets that he's going to unleash the Spirit on all his children.

Second, with the help of the Spirit, the Apostles manage to outperform their master. They bring several times more people into the kingdom than Jesus did during his whole earthly ministry. And they do it in a single day. Jesus had told them they would do greater works than those done by him. And the Pentecost crusade is the first place in Acts – the first of many – where that promise is fulfilled.

What does this story reveal to us about the Holy Spirit? There's a lot here to talk about, but I want to zero in on a few key points that are directly relevant to our life here and now.

The first point is that the Lord gives the Holy Spirit to everyone who loves and serves him. He doesn't give the Spirit to a select sub-set of special disciples. The Spirit is poured out for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord.

Some people have the idea that the Spirit has been reserved for spiritual super-heroes. They believe the Spirit is given only to those who qualify by virtue of their strong faith and their powerful prayer life. They admit that it isn't always easy to distinguish between the Spirit-filled Christians and the ordinary ones. But there are tell-tale signs. For example, Spirit-filled Christians pray every day, sometimes for hours, and will often receive inaudible messages from the Lord. The prayers of ordinary Christians, by contrast, are perfunctory, unfocused and dull. Ordinary Christians seldom have the sense that the Lord is speaking in the silence of their hearts. For Spirit-filled Christians, worship is an experience that's rich in emotion. Ordinary Christians, by contrast, are seldom moved by the music or the message. Worship is often something they endure. According to this view, these differences arise because of the presence or the absence of the Spirit in a person's life.

That idea is powerful. It's powerful, and compelling to many people, because it seems to be supported by our daily experience. The problem, however, is that it isn't supported by the New Testament. It isn't consistent with the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles. The Holy Spirit isn't a feeling we carry with us, and it isn't a power that we have to learn to exercise. The Holy Spirit is the very life of God that flows from Jesus to everyone who turns to him in faith. He's the Lord's gift to *everyone* who believes, regardless of how much faith they have, or how many hours they spend in prayer, or how they happen to feel in church. Paul says quite plainly in Romans, "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ" – and by that he means the Holy Spirit – "they do not belong to Christ" (Romans 8:9). He reminds the believers in Corinth that, as Jesus followers, they carry God's Spirit with them. He writes: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you received from God?" (1 Corinthians 6:19).

Some of you are intimidated by spiritual super-stars. When you're near them you feel weak and inadequate. They remind you of how far short you fall, and what a long way you have to go.

The Lord is reminding you today that he has given you the Spirit. He's letting you know that the Spirit is with you even when you can't feel him, and even when you aren't cooperating with him. More than that, he's assuring you that, in his eyes, there's nothing ordinary about you. He has made you one of his own, and he has a great and wonderful plan for your life.

The second point is that when we decide to get in line with the Spirit's agenda, amazing things happen.

We need to realize that the Spirit with us even when we feel burned out, dried up, and cut off from God. But we also need to realize that our progress and our productivity as Christians is dependent on our response to the Spirit. Again, the question we face every day is: Are we going to follow the Spirit's lead and cooperate with his agenda? Or are we going to play it safe, and stay within our comfort zone?

Following the Spirit and cooperating with his agenda means something different for each one of us. And the Spirit's call in our life changes over time.

- He may be calling you right now to talk about the Lord with someone who doesn't know him.
- He may be calling you to start a new business so you can finance world-wide missions.
- He may be calling you to sacrifice of your time or your money on behalf of people who can never repay you, for a cause that few people know or even care about.
- He may be calling you to step up to a leadership position where you can leverage your greatest strengths for God's kingdom.
- He may be calling you cut back on your outside commitments so you can spend more time with your kids.
- He may be calling you to stay in a marriage that seems to be dying.

The lesson of Pentecost is clear: The Spirit can use us to do far more than we ask for or even imagine. So whatever it is that the Spirit is calling you to do today, do it with all your heart. Do it with the attitude

that the Lord is going before you. And when things get crazy, as they surely will, remember that there isn't any obstacle that God can't overcome.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for giving us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that proceeds from the Father, the Spirit that's with us wherever we go.

Inspire us with vision of the church you give us in Acts—the church born in Jerusalem with tongues of fire – the church that pulses with your eternal life. Help us today to overcome our doubts and fears. Reveal to us your will and make us bold and brave to follow your lead.

We are your beloved people, Holy God, but we have a long way to go. Thank you for inviting us to your table in spite of our unworthiness. Cleanse our hearts. Feed our spirits. Send us out in the strength of your Spirit to do the work of Jesus. Amen.