

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You consistently help us in times of need. When we do not know what to do because everything has become like a weight upon our shoulders, You encourage us with Your love and extend Your hands to offer help. Give us the spiritual eyes to respond to Your love, and the spiritual courage to receive the help You would give us, for You alone can set us free, and we praise You: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: TRANSPORT

1. For yourself

Give thanks to God for your mobility and the places where you can walk in leisure and for enjoyment

2. For your friends and family

Give thanks to God for the times you have spent walking and sharing with friends, and pray for any of your friends who have problems

3. For the church and its work

Pray for those who walk past your church each day, and pray about the church's mission to its neighbourhood

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Give thanks to God for national parks and other places where you can walk freely within your country. Pray that these will be properly protected in law, and kept for people's enjoyment and leisure.

Meditation

We weep when we have fallen short and let ourselves down;
We wish we had learned our lessons long ago
For we cannot later put things right.

We weep when we have failed and let our loved ones down;
We wish we had shown more love to them
Because they mean so much to us.

We weep when we have been faithless and let our friends down;
We wish we had shown the courage and love
That would have made a difference.

We weep when we have sinned and let our Saviour down;
We wish we had kept a closer hold on truth
And everything Jesus taught us.

But do not fear.

Our weeping shows we feel the penalties of waywardness;
And truly contrite tears open heavenly doors
Leading to the One whose heart is love.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Acts 2:1-4

¹ When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all gathered together in one place. ² Suddenly, a noise like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were staying. ³ Tongues of fire appeared to them, which separated and came to rest on each of them, ⁴ and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them power.

Review

These four verses describe the most phenomenal work of God's power in human history, outside of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God's Spirit comes in power on the disciples, and they receive the extraordinary supernatural gift of 'tongues'.

What we have read today is extraordinary by any standards! All heaven and earth had been waiting for the moment when God, in fulfilment of many prophecies, would burst upon the world in the power of His Holy Spirit, giving gifts to those who have faith in Jesus. In the first century A.D., the feast of Pentecost was a minor Jewish harvest festival event, celebrating the barley harvest, some seven weeks after the celebration of 'first fruits' at Passover time. But from the day this happened to the present, we now celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the church; the day when God baptised His people, the church, and gave them the power and authority to do His will on earth.

Luke describes what happened with the minimum of words. The disciples were '*gathered together in one place*', presumably the same room in Jerusalem in which they met for regular prayer (1:14), on the day of the Jewish festival of Pentecost (2:1). Suddenly, the Holy Spirit came '*violently*', and '*filled the whole house*', with the result that the fire of God touched each one of those present, and they were given the supernatural gift of speaking '*in other tongues*'.

The story sounds simple enough but it is truly dramatic; what is this wind that came so utterly and touched the disciples like fire? And what on earth is this strange gift of 'speaking in other tongues' that the Holy Spirit is so keen to give, in 'power'? The Christian church is unfortunately divided today between those who find this story totally believable, perhaps because they have been touched by the Holy Spirit and possibly speak in 'tongues' themselves, and those who find the story difficult, for although they do not wish to deny the work of the Holy Spirit, what is described here is beyond their own experience. Books that have been written about this passage of Scripture clearly reflect these divisions.

Divisions in the church such as this should not stop God's people from studying this passage to get at its truths. Indeed, it is perhaps the only way these divisions can be overcome. We must face this great text in the same way we face others that describe God's dramatic intervention into the world, such as the stories of Jesus' birth, death, and especially His Resurrection. However much we may like to analyse them, they describe mysteries of God's grace, which are central to the way He works within His world, and the Christian cannot ultimately like or dislike what happens or why. It has been God's plan to reveal Himself in this way and no one can afford to ignore Him.

When God came on the disciples like a violent wind blowing from heaven (2:1), this was surely not a total surprise to the disciples gathered on the first Pentecost. Firstly, Jesus had specifically said this was what would happen. He told His disciples He would send the Holy Spirit to be with them after His resurrection, to help and support them (John 14:46f.), and also to empower them to do what God required of them (Luke 24:49). Secondly, the whole of Scripture speaks of a strong connection between 'wind' and the Holy Spirit; the word 'spirit' itself means 'wind', or 'breath' (Genesis 2:7). Thirdly, Scripture also testifies to the close connection between the Holy Spirit and 'fire'; the prophet Isaiah says, '*Your breath is a fire that consumes ...*' (Isaiah 33:11). Any of God's people who have studied His Word will be familiar with these things and should not be surprised that God chooses to come in power in this way.

The one truly unique feature of this passage is God's giving of the gift of 'speaking in tongues'. In our next study, we will look at the confusion that exists over whether the gift given at Pentecost was the same as that given later to the Corinthian Christians, as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 14. But we should not ignore the fact that Scripture uses one word for this gift, as do Christians who have used it over many centuries. The evidence is that the believer who receives this gift is enabled to speak in an unknown language to God, and knows that this is the work of the Holy Spirit precisely because it is beyond normal experience, it is 'supernatural'. The gift assures the recipient of God's love and power, and it is not a matter of being transported into a spiritual trance, it is like being able to speak to God in pure worship, unfettered by the normal limitations of language.

It is of great sadness that opinions about the gift of 'tongues', the fruit of God's generosity for the blessing of His people, have caused divisions within the church. This is surely the work of Satan, who seeks to destroy God's work. Let us hope that all God's people rise above fractious opinions about this gift to celebrate

together the true meaning of Pentecost, the birthday of the church. God has come in power to enable His church to be what it was intended to be; the bold witness of His love, grace and glory in this world.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the Translation of the passage
- Background to the Jewish feast of Pentecost
- Where were the disciples when the Holy Spirit came?
- Tongues of fire
- The gift of tongues – a different gift from that in 12 Corinthians?

Notes on the Translation of the passage

V2 'suddenly, a noise like that of a violent wind came from heaven ...'

Other translations:

'and suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind' (NRSV)

The grammar of the Greek sentence does not easily transfer into English, it says more literally, *'suddenly there came from heaven a sound like that produced by a violent wind'*. The translator is faced by the problem of how to translate the phrase 'produced by ...', and I have chosen the simplest option possible, which adds no more to the text than necessary.

V4 'speak in other tongues'

At this point of the story, there is no hint that this might mean anything other than 'other languages'. The extraordinary nature of the gift is yet to be revealed by Luke, and it is only later that we are told exactly what 'speaking in tongues' means. But the hint of it is contained in the fact that 'tongues of fire' came to rest on the followers of Jesus.

V4 'as the Spirit gave them power'

The Greek here translates 'as the Spirit gave them utterance', but this is merely a Greek way of emphasising the fact that the Holy Spirit empowered them to speak in other 'tongues'.

Background to the Jewish feast of Pentecost

The feast of 'Pentecost' was originally the Jewish festival of 'weeks', marking seven weeks since the feast of Passover and the celebration of the 'first fruits' of the year's harvest. It was the second of three harvest events in the Jewish calendar, the last being the festival of Tabernacles, or 'ingathering', held at the very end of the harvest season. For this reason, Pentecost was perhaps the lesser of the three feasts. Descriptions of this festival can be found in Exodus 23:16a, 34:22a, Leviticus 23:15f. Numbers 28:26f. and Deuteronomy 16:9f.

In the Jewish tradition of the second century A.D., possibly reflecting that of the first century, Passover was celebrated as the day on which God gave the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It is also believed that when Moses gave the law he did so in the 70 different languages of the known world. Some have suggested that this idea has seeped into early Christianity and has given rise to the idea of speaking in tongues, but this is rather far-fetched and there is no evidence for it apart from supposition.

Where were the disciples when the Holy Spirit came?

From the evidence of the first verse of Acts 2, some people think that the disciples were gathered in the Temple rather than the room that served as their home (1:13). There are some suggestions in Scripture that the disciples gathered frequently for worship in the Temple after the resurrection, for example, Luke reports that they *'stayed continually at the Temple, praising God'* (Luke 24:53). This, together with the fact that the Greek word for 'house', in verse 2, is the same as that for 'Temple', makes an apparently strong case.

The scenario we are then presented with is this. The disciples are gathered together in the Temple to worship and praise God, when supernatural disturbance of wind and fire comes upon them, with the result that they begin to speak in foreign languages, which are recognised by the people in the Temple (as we discover next in 2:6). This all sounds quite plausible, except that at the end of verse 2, Luke says that the Holy Spirit filled the whole house *'where they were staying'* or as other versions of Scripture say, *'where they were sitting'*. I have translated the last word 'staying' precisely to make the point that the Greek verb used here indicates a place of abode, and not just where the group happened to be at a particular moment of time. This precludes the idea that the disciples were in the Temple when the Holy Spirit came.

Luke does not give a clear timeline to the story in Acts chapters 2, but it is best to think of the larger group of disciples (the 120 mentioned in chapter 1) being gathered together for prayer in the room mentioned in verse 13 of chapter 1, and then making their way to the Temple to worship and praise God.

Tongues of fire

There is a close connection in the Old Testament between the holiness of God and fire; this is found in Leviticus 2:3,10, 10:12,13, 21:6 etc. Isaiah also describes God's spirit as a 'spirit of fire' in one of his early prophecies about the wrath of God (Isaiah 4:4). More significant than this, God Himself is associated with fire frequently in the Old Testament, for example, He guides Israel through the wilderness by means of His presence in a cloud by night and the fire by day (Exodus 40:38).

Whilst these references from the Old Testament help us understand why the Holy Spirit comes in the form of fire, it is perhaps best to see this as a fulfilment of the prophetic words of John the Baptist, who declares that when Jesus comes He will baptise 'with the Holy Spirit and with fire' (Matt 3:11). What is more important is probably this, the symbol of fire is a symbol of judgement. Now, in the light of the fact that the people of Israel had just murdered the son of God, we might expect God to come in the fire of judgement to consume Israel. But He does not do this, He comes with a different kind of fire, the fire of the Holy Spirit in blessing upon those who follow Jesus. This is a remarkable turn around, and it says volumes about the grace of God available to humanity now that Jesus has died on the Cross.

The gift of tongues – a different gift from that in 12 Corinthians?

It is often suggested that there is a difference between the gift that was given on the first day of Pentecost and mentioned in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. This is because those who hear the disciples on the first day of Pentecost hear them speak in a distinct variety of known foreign languages (2:6), whereas Paul clearly speaks of a mystical experience of speaking unknown languages (1 Corinthians 14).

It is worth remembering that false reports surrounded what happened on the first Pentecost, as we will see in the next study in this series. The gift of tongues is well attested both in the writings of Paul (see 1 Corinthians 12 and 14) and also in the life and faith of many Christians over the centuries. There are plenty of recorded examples of people speaking in tongues in the form of an unknown language which gives glory to God; Paul says firmly that the gift should only be used in the public worship of God if an interpretation is also given, so that God's Word may be made intelligible (1 Cor 14). But more than this, there are also examples of people who find that they have spoken languages they did not know; known languages that others could interpret in the normal way. Both surely come under the purview of the term 'speaking in tongues'. As so often in Scripture, we do not take one part of Scripture and pit it against another, we take both and see how they fit together.

Discipleship

Application

- Accepting the Holy Spirit
- Accepting the gift of tongues

Accepting the Holy Spirit

The coming of God in the form of His Holy Spirit at Pentecost is a remarkable and necessary part of God's plan for the church and the world. He has come once at Pentecost not so that he cannot come again, but as Scripture testifies in the stories of the early church (found in the rest of the book of Acts), so that He can continue to come and bless those who call on His name. It was Paul's boast that the Gentiles should be accepted into the church universal because the Holy Spirit had fallen on them 'like us at first' (Acts 15:8). It should now be the boast of every Christian and every Christian community that God has blessed them by His Holy Spirit, and this is proof that God is at work.

In our day, the Holy Spirit has become for some a theological 'football', tossed too and fro in discussion without any desire that it should find a home. Ultimately, and in God's eyes, the Holy Spirit and the church of God cannot be divided, and the wisest advice that can be given to God's people is surely that they should accept from God what God has given, and this is His Holy Spirit. There is an abundance for us all to receive of God's grace and we cannot receive it if we prefer our own ways of doing things to the ways of God through His Spirit.

Accepting the gift of tongues

God has blessed His people by giving the gift of tongues, and it is a gift that signifies both the willing submission of the believer into the hands of a gracious God and also the abundance of God that is greater than we can imagine, literally. There is much debate today over whether God intends all His people to have the gift of tongues, and some have argued from the evidence of Acts 2 that this should be so. Nevertheless, we should never label people on the basis of the gifts they have received. My opinion is that God may well desire that all His people have this gift, however, we all fall short of what God desires for us, and we should not therefore think less of people who have not yet received the gift. The reasons why some have it and some do not are complex and related to all manner of personal details. The church as a whole should welcome the gift and it should always seek to encourage people in its use and promote understanding of the gift. Tongues, like nearly all the other spiritual gifts, is best used in the church alongside other spiritual gifts so that it is not given undue prominence (see 1 Corinthians 12).

Questions for groups

1. Should we always expect the Holy Spirit to come dramatically, as He did on the first day of Pentecost? If not why not?
2. Discuss in your group how God is at work in your midst. What does the Holy Spirit have to do with your work as a church, and to what extent are you open to the Holy Spirit in your worship and work?
3. What does this passage teach us about the Holy Spirit? What does it say that is different from what we can find elsewhere in Scripture?

Discipleship challenges

- *Do you speak in tongues? If you do then try to write down what the gift means to you and describe how your use of it has changed over the years. If you have not received it, then ask the Lord to bless you as He sees fit and be content in this, but try to make sure that you understand what this gift means to those who have received it.*
- *Does it mean anything to you to speak of being 'baptised' in the Holy Spirit? Again, write down what this means to you and why, and look up the different references about this to be found in these studies and elsewhere. Make sure that you are not missing out on what God has planned for you.*

Final Prayer

Thank You Lord Jesus for the gracious gift of Your Holy Spirit, who reassures us of Your presence, and liberates us into Your service. We are grateful for all You have done for us, and we ask You to lead us into all truth when studying Your Word, so that we do not stray from the pathway we have chose and You have blessed. Thank You, Lord Jesus, AMEN
