

Aftermath: The End and the Beginning

Acts 2:1-21

Revival starts with the Holy Spirit.

A sermon preached by
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The wildfires are back. Fortunately, the wet winter on the West Coast has limited the conditions necessary for the devastating wildfires that have plagued that region lately. But up in Canada, they have had an early heat wave, and in the last few days, over 100 wildfires have ignited. The smoke from these fires is being carried by the prevailing winds into the Rocky Mountains and the Great Plains, causing air quality issues as far south as Oklahoma and Arkansas. Have you noticed some really red sunsets this week?

We are all acquainted with the destruction that can come from wildfires: timber, wildlife, buildings, homes, and human lives can all be lost. But not all fires are destructive in nature.

I was driving along a rural Arkansas highway a few years ago, and I saw a massive amount of smoke up ahead. I was worried that I might be driving into a wildfire. But when I got near the fire, I saw several vehicles and Forest Service personnel already on hand. They were doing what they called a “prescribed burn.” Like a wildfire, it involved fire and smoke and heat, but it was a controlled burn, initiated by the Forest Service for a purpose. Prescribed burns serve two purposes: they eliminate the small, tangled underbrush that grows up and provides fuel for uncontrolled wildfires. The controlled fire prevents wildfires from getting out of control. The second purpose is to improve the habitat for wildlife that live in the forest, not only preventing devastating fires, but also stimulating the growth of new plants that provide food for the animals.

Pentecost may seem like a wildfire; it was a pretty chaotic scene to start with. But in actuality, it was like a controlled burn. It wasn’t destructive at all. It was a fire with a purpose. The tongues of fire that rested on each disciple were not destructive fire. They didn’t burn the house down or even harm the disciples’ heads. It was a sign of the presence of God, a fire that burned but did not consume, like the burning bush that spoke to Moses.

The wind that blew through the house was not destructive, like a tornado or a hurricane. It was symbolic of the Holy Spirit. The word in both Greek and Hebrew is the same for wind, breath, and spirit. Jesus had compared the wind to the Spirit when he talked with Nicodemus. This wind was just a little more exciting than a gentle night breeze.

Then there were the languages. Scholars have debated the nature of the Pentecost speech. Later on, Paul talks about unintelligible, ecstatic spiritual language that must be interpreted to be useful. You can still hear that sort of prayer language today if you go to a Pentecostal church. But Acts is pretty clear that these words were completely intelligible. They were the words of languages representing all the foreigners in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost. All of them—Parthians, Medes, Elamites and the rest—heard words in their own languages calling them to pay attention to what was going on. So what was going on? Had the disciples spent the 10 days since the Ascension with Rosetta Stone, learning new languages? No, this was a gift from God, an ability given by the Holy Spirit.

The day of Pentecost was not a day of chaos. It was a day of excitement and wonder and joy. But it all had a purpose. It was a controlled burn for God. A wildfire destroys a landscape; a controlled burn changes the landscape for the better. When the Holy Spirit gets loose, the landscape is changed. Your life is never the same again. It's better.

Think about Peter, sort of the center of the action on Pentecost. Peter was the leader of the disciples. His real name was Simon, but Jesus had given him that nickname—Peter—which meant Rock, because Peter was the rock on which Jesus was going to build his church. Peter was always the first to speak up, including the night before Jesus died, when Peter pledged his unfailing loyalty to Jesus. Then he blew it. Under pressure from the crowd, Peter denied three times that he knew Jesus. The gospel of Luke mentions that Jesus saw Peter deny him. Can you imagine? When the cock crowed, just like Jesus said it would, Peter collapsed in guilt and sorrow.

After the resurrection, Jesus made a point to rehabilitate Peter. Peter was the first disciple to see the empty tomb. Luke says Jesus appeared to Peter alone, although we don't have a record of that appearance. By the Sea of Galilee, the Lord asked Peter to declare his love three times, each time peeling away the guilt of a denial. Then he called Peter to renew his commitment with the simple words, "Follow me."

So Peter was primed. When the wind blew through the house, and the fire danced, and his brothers spoke languages they had not learned, Peter got ready. When the crowd gathered and began to make fun of these drunken Galileans, Peter stood up. He began to speak. The Holy Spirit gave him words. He remembered the prophecies relating to this day. He told the people of the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's plan for the salvation of the world, and ended with these words: "*Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.*"¹

At least 3,000 of the people understood the language Peter was speaking, and they responded. They were all baptized that day, and the Church of Jesus Christ was born.

The Holy Spirit can change the landscape of anybody's life. This week we remembered the 285th anniversary of John Wesley's Aldersgate experience. John Wesley had failed miserably as a missionary to the colony of Georgia. He had returned to London to regroup and figure out his next chapter. On the brink of despair, he went unwillingly to a prayer meeting in a house on Aldersgate Street, and the Holy Spirit met him there. Wesley wrote in his journal for May 24, 1738, "About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death."²

Some have mischaracterized Aldersgate as a salvation experience for Wesley, but he had been a life-long Christian and was an ordained Anglican priest. He knew Jesus. But at Aldersgate, Wesley received the assurance of the Holy Spirit that everything he believed was true and powerful and life-giving. For the next half-century, John Wesley would lead a Methodist revival that continues to live around the globe to this day.

Both Peter and John Wesley knew Jesus, but it was only when they had the experience of the Holy Spirit that they began to have a world-changing impact on their time and place. That's because the Holy Spirit is the energy of faith. The Holy Spirit is what transforms a small group of timid, fearful, locked-door disciples into a troop of world-class evangelists that, in the words of Acts, would "*turn the world upside down*"³ and give their lives for the cause of Christ. The Holy Spirit is the difference between a mediocre Christian and a mighty disciple of Jesus.

John Piper calls to mind the Aswan High Dam on the Nile River in Egypt. It is 375 feet high and 11,000 feet (over two miles) across. Construction on this great dam started in 1953, and it wasn't finished until 1970. While the dam was under construction, the Nile River continued to flow. The people downstream depended on it for water, for fish, for crops, for recreation. Even as the reservoir filled up, enough water flowed to meet their needs. Then in 1971 there was a grand dedication ceremony, and the 12 turbines with their ten billion kilowatt capacity created enough electricity to light every city in Egypt. On that day a power was unleashed that spread far beyond the needs of a few folk down river and brought possibilities they had never imagined.

Piper says, "Pentecost is like the dedicatory opening of the Aswan High Dam. Before Pentecost, the river of God's Spirit blessed the people of Israel and was their very life. But after Pentecost the power of the Spirit spread out to light the whole world. None of the benefits enjoyed in the pre-Pentecostal days were taken away. But ten billion kilowatts were added to enable the church to take the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ to every tongue and tribe and nation."⁴

We need some of that Holy Spirit electricity today! We need the energy of a faith empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Church today needs the dedication of those disciples down through the ages who changed the world for Christ. We are facing huge challenges in our world today: a culture of violence, political polarization, an environmental emergency, economic instability, endemic racism, not to mention the personal struggles of grief, anxiety, loneliness, poverty and illness. The church is facing huge challenges today. The pandemic exposed our weakness and accelerated the decline we were already experiencing. It is a struggle to capture the hearts and minds and commitment of people who have many other options. To be perfectly honest, I don't see a human way out of the mess we're in. Thank God we have God. Without faith, we would have no hope. But through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we know we have the power to overcome whatever obstacles obstruct our path. How do we plug in to the abundant power God can provide?

One Methodist with a great understanding of the Holy Spirit was E. Stanley Jones, the missionary to India and world-wide evangelist from the 1920's until his death in 1973. Brother Stanley was not Pentecostal, but the work of the Holy Spirit was crucial to his concept of the Christian life. He often referred to the Holy Spirit as the "birthright of every Christian."

His own experience of the Holy Spirit came in a personal way in the solitude of his own home. He was reading a devotional book and felt the prompting of God to receive the

Holy Spirit. He asked God to wait until he finished reading his book, then he would begin seeking. But God was insistent, and Stanley put his book down and got on his knees and surrendered to God. Then he described what happened next: “I arose from my knees. I said, ‘Yes, it’s done.’ I walked around the room pushing my hands this way and that, as though I was pushing doubt away. I did that for I don’t know how many minutes when suddenly I was filled—wave after wave—of divine fire seemed to be going through my being—purging, cleansing. I could only walk the floor with tears of joy flowing down my cheeks, in praise. [The Holy Spirit] had moved in. And then life seemed to be unified at a deeper level. I didn’t seem to be at war with myself as I had been before.”⁵

In a very methodical (Methodistical?) way, E. Stanley Jones gave four steps to receive the Holy Spirit:

1. Understand that it is God’s intention to give you the Holy Spirit. God wants you to have this. It is your birthright as a believer in Jesus. You don’t have to overcome any reluctance on the part of God to give you this gift.

2. Make it your intention to receive the Holy Spirit. This is not casual Christianity. This is going deep. This is opening yourself up to a whole new level of spiritual life. You have to want this.

3. Offer yourself to God in complete surrender. It’s no longer about me; it’s about God. If we give our all, our everything, to God, then God will give God’s self completely to us—the fullness of life in the Spirit.

4. Receive the gift by faith. God wants to give it; we believe it; we want it; we ask for it. Why would it not happen? It may not be really emotional or cataclysmic. You may not get the wind, fire, and tongues of Pentecost. But you can trust that God will do what God promises to do, and you can receive it.⁶

The Holy Spirit can come in many ways. In Scripture, it came on the Day of Pentecost, with wind and fire and unlearned languages. It was dramatic and public. But Jesus also gave the Holy Spirit to the disciples on the day of resurrection, with a simple breath and the words, “*Receive the Holy Spirit.*”⁷ Today the Holy Spirit can come in a great moment of revival, like it did this spring at Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky. Or the Holy Spirit can come to a believer on his or her knees in a moment of prayer.

If it feels like revival, big and dramatic and public, or small and personal and quiet, it’s the Holy Spirit. God wants you to have this. Desire it. Surrender to it. Believe it. It’s your birthright. It belongs to you. Claim it, for your own life, and for the life of the Church that Jesus founded on the Day of Pentecost.

INVITATION

Our closing hymn today is a little chorus, “Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh On Me.” It was written in 1926 by a Presbyterian minister from North Carolina named Daniel Iverson. Rev. Iverson was attending a revival meeting in Orlando, Florida, where he heard a powerful sermon on the Holy Spirit. Inspired, he found a piano and composed this tune. He shared it with the evangelistic team, who introduced it that night. The crowd sang it over and over as an invitation for the Spirit to work and then every night for the rest of the crusade. As we sing the hymn this morning, I want to invite you to be in prayer. Pray to receive the Holy Spirit in your own heart, for the first time or yet again. Pray for the revival we need in our church. When revival comes—WHEN it comes—it will not come because of our wonderful facilities. It will not come because of the programs of ministry we offer.

It will not come because of whatever denomination we choose. It will not even come because of inspiring sermons (should you ever get one). Revival will come through the work of the Holy Spirit. It will come when we have the Holy Spirit courage to speak a word of witness or invitation to our unchurched friends and family. It will come when we have Holy Spirit compassion on those who are broken and hurting and not like us. It will come when we have a Holy Spirit passion for the gospel of Jesus Christ. It will come when we have a Holy Spirit joy that can't help but show itself to the world.

If you want to pray at the altar rail today, please come. If you want me to pray with you about anything, cup your hands and hold them up, and I will come pray with you. Let's sing this beautiful and simple song today, and let the Holy Spirit work among us.

¹ Acts 2:36.

² John Wesley, *Journal*, May 24, 1738.

³ Acts 17:6.

⁴ John Piper, "Was the Holy Spirit not on Earth before Pentecost?" *Gospel Coalition Blogs*, May 24, 2015.

⁵ E. Stanley Jones, "The Gift of the Holy Spirit is the Birthright of All Christians," in Anne Mathews-Younes, *Living Upon the Way* (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing House, 2008), 184f.

⁶ E. Stanley Jones, in Mathews-Younes, 188f., 204.

⁷ John 20:22.