

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 5

The Spirit Comes in Power

As we continue in our series on the book of Acts, I would really encourage you to connect with the sermons before this one - especially if you have missed any weeks. I believe there will be something from the Lord for you every week, whether you heard the last sermon or not, but the real impact of this challenging book will only be felt by those who take the time to get the big picture.

Last week we looked at the issue of the baptism of the Holy Spirit and I would suggest it might be a good sermon to visit again as we wade through what has become a very controversial issue, but one which really is very simple when we get back to the Bible and back to the heart of God.

Acts 2:1-4 *"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."*

Pentecost is the Greek word for *fiftieth* and it marked the annual Jewish festival scheduled for fifty days after the Passover. It was called the '*The Feast of Weeks*' and also the '*The Feast of Harvest*' because on that day Jewish people presented the first fruits of their annual harvest.

Was it a coincidence for the Holy Spirit to bring the necessary power for the disciples to be witnesses to Jesus throughout the world precisely on the day of thanksgiving for the harvest? Possibly, but perhaps not. The disciples were about to begin reaping a harvest of souls that has continued now for over 2,000 years. Do you remember what Jesus said about the harvest?

John 4:35-36 *"Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together."*

Matthew 9:37-38 *"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*

What were the disciples praying for with one accord in one place? They were praying for the Holy Spirit to come upon them and impart to them the power to do what Jesus had asked them to do - and that is to bring the gospel of God's grace to people across the world - across all conceivable barriers. They were praying that the Lord would send them forth as labourers into the harvest field.

Missions expert, Donald McGavran, talked about the need to develop a 'theology of harvest.' He was impatient with missionaries or evangelists who seem satisfied to search for the lost with little or no regard to how they are ultimately found. Too many Christian workers have seen so little fruit ... and to justify their existence, they develop a rationale for their existence which did not depend on numbers or converts. Results therefore become irrelevant in evaluating success or failure.

Fortunately for us, the disciples in the upper room were not familiar with such a contrived theology. They were praying for something much more positive. They knew that Jesus came to save the lost and they knew that it was God's intent to discipline, strengthen and multiply His Churches until all people on earth have had the chance to hear the gospel from their own people, who speak their own language and whose word is unobstructed by cultural barriers. This is 'harvest theology.'

Presumably, all of the 120 believers were together in the same house when the Holy Spirit came. We are not sure whether the house was the upper room or some other house in the temple grounds, because they were spending time daily in each place. Because of the large place that would have been needed to accommodate the crowd that would have gathered, it was most likely a structure of some kind connected to the temple.

Now I think it is significant that the phrase back in Acts 1:14 is repeated here, telling us that they were all together in one accord, as some translations put it. This reminds us of the need for agreement in prayer. When the Holy Spirit came, there was no room for doubt that it was a unique occasion. Nothing like this had ever happened when Jesus was on earth. God showed them clearly what Jesus meant when He said it would be to their advantage to have the Holy Spirit with them instead of the Son.

Three tangible signs indicated that the Spirit had come.

Acts 2:2 *"Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting."*

The sound must have been tremendous. Those of us who live in areas that are protected from windstorms, tornadoes and hurricanes will not appreciate what strong winds really are, nor the sound they make. The sound must have been public and external and not just some phenomenon of group psychologically. It was loud enough, unusual enough and probably terrifying enough, so that the people in the temple area of Jerusalem and other parts of the city were drawn toward this to see what might be happening. In our day it would have made the evening news for sure!

I want to focus for a moment on the word 'suddenly.' The Holy Spirit is free and sovereign and not bound to anyone's timing or technique for how to get His power. We should be confident of His daily, indwelling presence and grace, walk in the obedience of this faith, and pray always for the outpouring of power from on high. But we cannot make the Spirit come and when He comes, He often comes suddenly. He will never become anyone's servant. He loves and He serves, but He keeps his own hours. He knows what is best for us.

In the summer of 1871 two women in Dwight L. Moody's congregation felt an unusual burden to pray for Moody *"that the Lord would give him the baptism of the Holy Ghost and of fire."* Moody would see them praying in the front row of his church and he was irritated. But soon he gave in and in September began to pray with them every Friday afternoon. He felt like his ministry was becoming a sounding brass with little power.

On November 24, 1871, Moody's Church building was destroyed in the great Chicago fire. He went to New York to seek financial help. Day and night he would walk the streets desperate for the touch of God's power in his life.

Then suddenly this happened to Moody, and I quote:

“One day, in the city of New York - oh, what a day! - I cannot describe it, I seldom refer to it; it is almost too sacred an experience to name ... I can only say that God revealed himself to me, and I had such an experience of his love that I had to ask him to stay his hand. I went to preaching again. The sermons were not different; I did not present any new truths, and yet hundreds were converted. I would not now be placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you should give me all the world - it would be small dust in the balance.”

He prayed, he obeyed and he waited. But he did not make the Spirit come. He came suddenly and when He came, notice that the effect was Pentecostal - not this time in the experience of tongues, but in the harvest. When the Spirit comes in power, he comes suddenly - on His own terms and in His own time - and He comes for harvesting.

Acts 2:3 *“They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.”*

The first tangible sign was audible, the second was visual. At presumably the same time they heard the sound of the wind, the disciples actually saw 120 separate tongues of fire touch each person's head. At that moment, John the Baptist's prophecy about Jesus started to take shape. Do you remember the prophecy from John the Baptist?

Luke 3:16 *“John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”*

Moses experienced God's presence in the burning bush and Isaiah's lips were touched with the burning coal of holiness from the altar. Dr John White was one of the greatest Christian authors of the 20th century and my wife and I had the incredible privilege of spending a whole week living with and learning from Dr White in a special Pastor's Retreat thirty years ago. Let me share with you something which John wrote about his encounter with the Holy Spirit:

“On one occasion it was as I prayed with the elders and deacons in my home. I had tried to teach them what worship was . . . We then turned to prayer. Perhaps partly to be a model to them I began to express worship, conscious of the poverty of my words. Then suddenly I saw in front of me a column of flame of about two feet in width. It seemed to arise from beneath the floor and to pass through the ceiling of the room. I knew - without being told - knew by some infallible kind of knowing that transcended the use of my intellect, that I was in the presence of the God of holiness. In stunned amazement I watched a rising column of flames in our own living room, while my brothers remained with their heads quietly bowed and their eyes closed...

I felt that I was in the presence of reality and that my brothers were asleep. For years afterward I never spoke of the incident. The others who were present could not have perceived the blend of stark terror and joy that threatened to sweep me away. How could I live and see what I saw? Garbled words of love and of worship tumbled out of my mouth as I struggled to hang on to my self-control. I was no longer trying to worship; worship was undoing me, pulling me apart. And to be pulled apart was both terrifying and full of glory.” (When the Spirit Comes with Power, p. 87–88)

This is what happened, it seems, to the disciples in Acts 2 when they saw tongues of fire and heard the violent wind. It filled them with an overwhelming sense of the presence of God. Until that moment we can imagine them praying (Acts 1:14) and reciting to each other the 23rd Psalm.

Then suddenly something happens that utterly transforms their *knowledge* of God's presence into an *experience* of God's presence. They see fire on each other's heads and they hear a loud wind. And they are filled not merely with a deductive certainty of God's present reality based on Psalm 23, but with an experiential certainty based on the extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The fire begins to burn in their hearts (Luke 24:32) and in their mouths ("tongues of fire"), and the sound of the wind surrounds them and envelops them with the tokens of God's power. They are simply overwhelmed with the greatness of God and it begins to spill out in praise. Like John White, they are almost undone by worship - so much so that some people say they are drunk (v. 13).

Perhaps at this point they may have remembered Jesus' promise:

John 14:12 *"Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."*

Some people struggle with the "*greater things than these*" part of this promise. How could anyone do greater works than Jesus Christ, they ask. The answer lies in the fact that the power by which Jesus ministered is the same power available to all of His disciples, then and now. Jesus was anointed by the same Holy Spirit that you and I and all believers are filled with and empowered by. Once we realise that it's God the Holy Spirit Who performs these mighty feats, we realise that He can minister in this way at any time and through anyone He wishes. That's why Jesus could promise what He did about our greater works.

Acts 2:4 *"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."*

To me it is interesting that the first miracle recorded after Jesus went home to heaven, is a miracle that, as far as we know, the Holy Spirit never did through Jesus. To our knowledge, Jesus never spoke in a language which He did not learn - but the disciples did. In fact, between them, they spoke in at least 15 different languages which they had never learned, and were understood by those who spoke them as their native language.

Luke lists 15 language groups but there is no reason to assume that this is a complete list. It may just be a representative list. Luke may have simply listed these groups as a 'for example' just to explain the magnitude of this miracle. It seems strange, for example, that none are mentioned from Greece or Syria. The Jewish Talmud reported that there were 70 nations in the Jewish dispersion and because Luke said people had come from every nation under heaven, it could be that many more than fifteen language groups were present.

Although most of them would have been Hellenistic Jews, a number of them were also proselytes, according to verse 10. The Proselytes were Gentiles by birth who have converted to Judaism by going through the required ceremonies including baptism and circumcision for males.

Acts 2:8 *"Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?"*

From the time Jesus was baptised to this point in history, virtually all the evangelism that was recorded in the Bible was mono-cultural, or as we saw in an earlier sermon in this series, E1 evangelism. There were no significant barriers for the gospel to cross.

The Apostles could have preached to the crowd in Aramaic and communicated fairly well. Those among them who knew Greek, could have done the same. But God had other plans to cross what we now see as a formidable cultural barrier. He did something that is certainly not an established missiological pattern - but it is still a principle. God took steps to contextualise the gospel. That is, make it relevant to the receiving culture. He showed that He respected the culture and language of each of the people groups gathered there.

The method He uses is to perform this miracle of languages that allows the disciples to speak in dialects that they had never learned. The first principle of cross-cultural evangelism is to present the gospel of Christ in cultural forms that are appropriate to each people group.

For example, if you wanted to get the gospel into an untouched tribe in the heart of Africa you wouldn't walk into their village with an NIV Bible tucked under your arm and start preaching on the street corner in English. And if you wanted to reach the youth culture right here in our own nation you wouldn't invite them into a cathedral, fire up the organ and sing *Nearer My God to Thee*.

That is why Bible translation work and language studies are seen as more important today than at any other time in the history of global missions. We must get the good news to people in a way they will understand and relate to. That was a very easy sentence to write or say, but it represents the single greatest challenge to the Church today if we truly want to fulfill the Great Commission.

If we are really serious about doing what God has called us to do and being who God has called us to be, then we need to be prepared to make a commitment to learning, growing and understanding the mission of Christ and the part He expects us to play in the fulfillment of that mission.

This teaching series, as with most, can change your life and your understanding of the Church. But that cannot and will not happen unless you make a choice to be informed and interested and willing to step out in faith and be challenged by God.

I'm reminded of the man who was conducting a city-wide survey and he approached one man on the footpath and asked him what he thought were the two greatest problems in the world. The man kept walking and said, *"I don't know and I don't care."* Little did he know, his answer was absolutely spot on. It could be argued that ignorance and apathy are the two greatest problems in the world today.

We need to be informed ; we desperately need teaching; we need to learn about God; about ourselves; about our reason for being here; about God's intention for us for this world - and we need to really care. We need to be interested and concerned and dare I say it, we need to be passionate about life and ministry and the purposes of God. None of that will happen without power from on high.