

B. The Event of Pentecost: The Outpouring of the Spirit

The long-awaited day of the kingdom of heaven was now at hand. The Son of David had entered into His glory and taken His seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Moreover, the foundation for Yahweh's spiritual house promised in the Scriptures – and by the King Himself – was now in place. All was prepared; it was time at last for the coming of the Spirit. Luke recorded that epochal event in 2:2-13, treating it in terms of two distinct components.

1. The first component in the Pentecost event was the three-fold *manifestation of the Spirit* among the gathered disciples (2:2-4). Like the Father and His angels, the Holy Spirit is a non-corporeal being, but unlike angels, the Holy Spirit never assumes a physical form. And yet, the circumstance and significance of Pentecost necessitated that His presence be palpable. His presence had to be discerned by the disciples, and in such a way that they would know instantly what (or who) it was that was in their midst. The Spirit accomplished this by manifesting Himself according to three sensory phenomena.

- a. The first was **auditory**: As the Spirit suddenly filled the place where the disciples were gathered, He introduced Himself with the sound of a powerful, rushing wind. The first thought of those present must have been that the house was being beset by a fast forming, violent storm. The *sound* produced by a rushing wind filled the room (2:2), but Luke conspicuously made no mention of any actual *blowing* of a wind. The reason is apparent: ***The Holy Spirit wanted the disciples to find an explanation for what was happening in the concept of wind, but without attributing it to a literal, physical wind.***

This makes perfect sense when one understands the biblical terminology and connotations associated with the Spirit. The Hebrew noun that denotes the Spirit is *ruach*, which has the basic sense of *wind* or *breath* (so also the Greek *pneuma*).

- With respect to God as well as created entities, it connotes *active and effectual movement*, often as it indicates the presence of life (Genesis 7:15, 22, 8:1; Exodus 10:13, 19; cf. also 14:21 with 15:8-10; John 3:5-8).
- This primary connotation finds a natural extension in the notion of an intangible power or life force; hence, the use of *ruach* to denote the vital, active essence – the “spirit” – of a living being, whether the uncreated God or His living creatures (cf. Genesis 6:3, 17; also Exodus 6:9, 35:21). So also *ruach* denotes a particular inward quality of a living being, as in the case of a “spirit of jealousy,” “spirit of wisdom,” etc. whether intrinsic to the person or communicated by God (cf. Exodus 28:3, 31:3, 35:30-31; Numbers 5:14, 11:16-29, 14:24, 16:22; Deuteronomy 2:30; etc.).

“When used of God... ruach does not connote the idea of divine immateriality (spirit, not matter), although doubtless that is implied in the general biblical perspective. The emphasis is, rather, on his overwhelming energy; indeed, one might almost speak about the violence of God.” (Ferguson, The Holy Spirit)

Ferguson continues: “‘Divine Spirit thus denotes ‘the energy of God,’ as in the striking parallelism of Isaiah 31:3... The emphasis lies in the contrast between weakness and power, not in the contrast between material and immaterial... Yahweh’s ruach is, as it were, the blast of God, the irresistible power by which he accomplishes his purposes, whether creative or destructive.”

By manifesting Himself under the impression of a powerful, rushing wind, the Spirit was insuring that the Jewish disciples would not mistake what they were experiencing and who was coming upon them. Moreover, this impression of mighty and effectual power was crucial for their understanding of what this event signified: *It was the Spirit of the living, almighty God who was among them, and He had come as the effectual, creative Spirit – the Spirit of life – to begin His mighty work of renewal and restoration as eternally purposed and predicted from the point of the Fall* (cf. Jesus’ declaration in John 3:1-8 with Ezekiel 37:1-14 in which Yahweh’s life-giving breath (ruach) is a metaphor for His Spirit).

- b. The Spirit manifested His presence through the auditory sensation of a mighty wind, but also through the **visual** appearance of tongues of fire resting on each individual in the room (2:3). Luke provides the primary interpretation of that imagery: The visual “dividing” of the Spirit so as to rest on each person symbolized His coming upon them and filling them with His own indwelling presence (2:4). The Spirit visibly associated Himself with each individual gathered in that place, leaving no doubt of His intention and what He was doing in forming the beginning of the new human community of the new creation: He was bringing forth man as he was created to be: *man of the Spirit*.

- The imagery of fire was an appropriate indicator of the Spirit’s presence, complementing the aural impression of wind. But this particular manifestation also highlighted the Holy Spirit’s identity as the Spirit of God, for it was reminiscent of Yahweh’s fiery appearances at Sinai (Exodus 3:1-6, 24:12-18; Deuteronomy 4:10-12), during the wilderness period (Exodus 13:20-22), and in relation to His sanctuary (Exodus 40:38; 2 Chronicles 7:1-3; cf. also Isaiah 4:1-5) and His altars (1 Kings 18:1-24; 1 Chronicles 21:26). Fire symbolized God’s presence, but also His *works*, for He is the God who acts; fire is aptly the most common metaphor for His judging, purging and destroying activity in relation to both His people and the nations (ref. Genesis 19:24-25; Leviticus 10:1-2; Numbers 16:1-35; Isaiah 30:27-33; Ezekiel 20:45-48; cf. also Deuteronomy 4:20-24, Isaiah 33:10-14 and Lamentations 2:1-3 with Hebrews 12:28-29).

By manifesting Himself under the imagery of wind and fire, the Spirit was first and foremost testifying that what was transpiring that day constituted Yahweh’s long-awaited *theophanic appearance* by which He had at last come to fulfill His promise to purify and sanctify His people (cf. Isaiah 32:9-20, 44:1-5, 59:1-21; Malachi 3:1-5, 4:1-3) and dwell among them forever in the person of His indwelling Spirit (Ezekiel 36-37).

- The metaphor of fire called to mind Old Testament imagery, but it equally pointed back to the forerunner's promise that the messianic Servant would baptize His people "*with the Holy Spirit and fire.*" Luke recorded this pronouncement in his first account (Luke 3:16), and the fulfillment of John's words was doubtless in his mind as he recounted the Spirit's fiery manifestation on Pentecost to begin His work of baptizing a new race of men bearing the likeness of the Son of God and Last Adam (ref. 2:38).
- c. The third aspect of the Spirit's self-manifestation was **vocal**, and it provides important insight into the visual symbolism of miniature pillars of fire. As this fire divided and dispersed to rest on each of the disciples, they began to *speak* in various dialects as the Spirit gave them utterance (2:3-4). It was likely this phenomenon that caused those present to detect the semblance of a tongue in the fiery form scattered throughout the room.

The disciples, baptized with the Spirit's purging fire, were being given, as it were, "*tongues of fire*" – the word of the gospel by which the Spirit in them would convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. Fire consumes so as to purify or destroy, and so this holy fire would result in men's purgation unto life or their destruction (cf. Acts 2:22-41 with John 16:7-15). Just as He promised, Jesus had now sent His Spirit into the world as the divine agent of re-creation; He had come as the Spirit of the new creation. In the first creation, the triune God had brought forth all things by the Spirit's creative power through the proclaimed word ("Then God said..."), and so it was to be in the new creation. *Once again the Spirit would bring life, order and fullness through the divine proclamation, but this time through the word of the gospel.*

2. Having described the descent and manifestation of the Spirit, Luke turned his attention to the *response* it drew from the gathering multitude (2:5-13). As the Spirit-filled disciples spilled out into the street, their enthusiasm and the cacophony of voices quickly drew a crowd of onlookers. These men were Jews and Gentile proselytes to Judaism who had traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover and had remained until the day of Pentecost (ref. again Deuteronomy 16:16). Not sure initially what to make of this unusual scene, the individuals in the crowd quickly realized that these men were speaking in various dialects and languages – one of which was their own. Each person gathered in the street heard one of the disciples speaking in his own language, and it soon became apparent that the same was true of the others around him.
- a. Some have tried to argue that the disciples weren't actually speaking in the various languages represented by the crowd, but that the Spirit was producing a supernatural "translation" within each individual's mind (so Luke's emphasis on *hearing*). The text indicates otherwise, and most persuasive is the way they respond to one another in view of what they were hearing (2:7ff). These men were from many different countries throughout the Mediterranean region, but it seems evident that at least some of them were familiar with multiple languages and dialects such that they could recognize them in the mouths of the disciples.

- b. Luke emphasized repeatedly that the crowd was hearing the disciples speaking in their native tongues (cf. vv. 6, 8, 11), and he hinted at the reason in his description of the multitude as being drawn “*from every nation under heaven*” (2:5). Taken in the absolute sense, this statement is absurd and clearly untrue. Even allowing that Luke’s list only summarizes the nations represented that day (vv. 9-11), it’s impossible to reasonably conclude that that assembly was comprised of individuals from every people group on earth. And yet Luke’s description wasn’t hyperbole for the sake of effect; he chose that language in order to communicate to his readers the significance of what was transpiring on that street in Jerusalem. Luke understood that the time for God to fulfill His promise to Abraham was at hand; *His blessing to be realized through His gospel was poised to flow out to all the nations of the earth* (ref. again Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:1-8).

The Old Testament Scriptures revealed that the Abrahamic promise of global blessing was to begin with Abraham’s physical covenant seed and then, through them, proceed to the ends of the earth.

- Israel, by its life of faithful sonship, would testify of its covenant God and Father to the surrounding nations. And through that witness, it would ultimately mediate the knowledge of Yahweh to all the earth’s families.
- But Israel failed its calling, and thus the prophets promised a new Israel – another Seed of Abraham who would fulfill Israel’s identity and calling as son, servant, disciple and witness (Isaiah 41:1ff, 43:1ff, 49:1ff).
- Jesus of Nazareth came as the true Israel, but He would accomplish His work of mediating God’s blessing to the world through those sharing His life and likeness by His indwelling Spirit. Jesus is the singular Seed of Abraham through whom all the families of the earth are to be blessed, but He is fulfilling His calling through His *body*, which first consisted of Jewish believers. God’s global blessing has its goal in forming a global people – a spiritual house – and that house has both a Jewish (apostolic) foundation and a Jewish initial superstructure. Salvation is *from* the Jews (John 4:1-26), but it was also first *to* the Jews (Romans 1:16; cf. 2:9-10).

In accordance with the Scriptures, the Spirit’s outpouring first saw Jews (and Jewish proselytes) hearing God’s gospel proclaimed through Jewish mouthpieces, but the fact that those words went out in the languages of the nations shows that the ultimate intent in them was global proclamation and blessing.

- c. The Spirit’s words came that day to God-fearing Jews and proselytes, highlighting His universal mission. God’s intention was global blessing through global proclamation. But the nature and effect of the curse shows that this blessing involves *reconciliation* and *ingathering*. The re-creating Spirit was going to restore the whole creation to God, and this work begins with His image-bearers. The creation’s estrangement came through man, and so does its reconciliation.