

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Key Events in the Acts: Pentecost - Acts 2

At school, I enjoyed learning about history. Not so much in learning about a string of dates and names, but gradually growing to appreciate that particular events had a fundamental impact on the development of nations and of commerce. Some of the unhappy situations which exist in the world today can be traced back to past events, some of them occurring many centuries ago.

Today, we begin a short series of talks entitled "Key events in the Acts," referring of course to the Acts of the Apostles, the fifth book in the New Testament. The four events which we are to consider in these talks are

- Pentecost in chapter 2,
- The conversion of Paul in chapter 9,
- The Gospel first preached to Gentiles in chapter 10, and
- The first Christian conversions in Europe in chapter 16.

It is no exaggeration to call each of these a key event in Christian history, because each has far-reaching and lasting effects, the results of which are seen today, almost 2,000 years after the events took place. There is no suggestion that these are the only key events recorded in the twenty eight chapters of the Acts; merely that these four have been chosen as being among the most notable.

We must spend a little time reminding ourselves of how momentous those times in the Acts were when considering God's dealings with mankind as recorded in the Bible. The period of time when God judged mankind on their ability to meet the requirements of the law had ended. That period of time included much of the Old Testament and covered many centuries. Jesus Christ, God's Son, had been born as a man, had lived, had died at Calvary, had risen from the dead and had ascended back to heaven; see the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. From this point, God calls all men everywhere to repent - not to earn salvation, but to receive the free gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus. From here on, the Gospel of the grace of God will be preached, starting the period of time when God deals with mankind on the principle of God's grace, not of His law. This period of time, still going on today, is sometimes referred to as the day of salvation and will last until Jesus returns as set out in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17, fulfilling the words of Jesus Himself when He said: "I will come again, and receive you unto myself..." - see John 14:3

Those were thrilling if challenging times for the followers of Jesus. The first church was established - see 2:42-47. There was great blessing as many became Christians - see 2:41 and 4:4, for example. The Gospel was forcefully preached to all people of whatever category, for example by Peter to the Jewish religious leaders when he said: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" - see 4:12. The believers in Jesus displayed Christ in their lives to such effect that, in Antioch, they gained the nickname of 'Christians', that is Christ-like ones, (see 11:26) and in Thessalonica the apostles and others were referred to as "These that have turned the world upside down..." - see 17:6. God displayed His power through many miracles at this time, for example the healing of the lame man in chapter 3.

It is important to realise that for most of the period of time covered by the Acts, the New Testament Scriptures had not been written. God's truth for His people was being taught by the apostles, those specially sent forth by God, divinely inspired to teach foundation truth and those who were unique to that period of time. When Paul on his missionary journeys preached the Gospel and there were those who believed in Christ, Paul usually then spent time with those converts to teach them the basic truths of the faith and sometimes subsequently sent others, for example Timothy and Titus, to ensure that that teaching was understood and being followed. He sometimes later wrote to those new churches to help build them up in their faith, and some of those letters or epistles now form part of the New Testament.

So, those times in the Acts were transitional times when great and new truths were being revealed and explained. Remember also that most of the first Christians were Jews and the first Christian church was formed in Jerusalem, the very centre of the Jewish religion. The Jews had been God's earthly people for centuries and were used to considering themselves as the only ones favoured in God's sight. It must have been hugely difficult for them even to realise, let alone accept, that in this new day of salvation no longer were the Jews to be specially favoured before

God, but that every individual in the world, through repentance and faith in Christ, could become part of God's heavenly people. Little wonder that the Jews showed as much hostility to Christians in the Acts as they had to Christ at Calvary. And most of the hostility was led by the Jewish religious leaders.

I have spent a fair amount of time emphasising the fundamental differences being brought in at that time. This is crucial background to this series of talks.

The first of these talks today deals with Pentecost and I would like to start by going back into the Old Testament, to Leviticus 23. In that chapter, God is instructing the Children of Israel, the Jews, to introduce 7 feasts to celebrate and give thanks to God for particular aspects of His dealings with them. As with much of Old Testament teaching, each of these feasts points forward to an aspect of New Testament teaching. The first three feasts are of the Passover, unleavened bread and firstfruits, that third feast of firstfruits pointing forward to Christ's resurrection. There then comes the fourth feast, the feast of wave loaves, to take place 50 days after the previous feast.

The word "Pentecost" means fiftieth and just as feasts three and four were to be separated by 50 days, so Pentecost in the Acts took place 50 days after Christ's resurrection from the dead. I don't know about you, but I never cease to be impressed with how the whole Bible fits together so perfectly and how God's plans for the future are so accurately pictured in events that took place in Old Testament times. Pentecost in the book of Acts was not an event which occurred at a haphazard time. It was something which God had planned and it occurred exactly in accordance with His timing!

The event of Pentecost is described in Acts 2:1-12 and I must read most of the exact words, only for the sake of time missing out part of verses 9-11 which set out the various languages in which those believers suddenly were empowered to speak.

I am reading from the Authorised Version of the Bible. "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?...we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God. And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this?"

As recorded in verse 1, all the believers were gathered together on the day of Pentecost. The word "all" would refer to the 120 mentioned in 1:15 and not just to the apostles. They were gathered together in Jerusalem in obedience and expectation because, before Jesus ascended back to heaven, He instructed "And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high" - see Luke 24:49.

Earlier, Jesus had told His disciples: "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you" - see John 14:16-17. Pentecost is the time when that promise was fulfilled. When Jesus used the phrase "another Comforter", I understand that the word "another" means one of the same kind. In other words, though Jesus had departed to heaven, another Person equally as great as Jesus would descend and abide, remain, stay with them for ever. This Person is the Holy Spirit, referred to as the Comforter, or One called alongside to help.

In the verses we have read from Acts 2, the Holy Spirit descended with sounds and signs of power, a rushing mighty wind and tongues like as of fire. The believers were enabled to speak languages which they had never learned, maybe never even heard. The One who descended was indeed a Person of power, who would now indwell all believers, enabling them to live for God.

This was a permanent indwelling. When David of the Old Testament realised that he had sinned so grievously in his actions to obtain Bathsheba as his wife, Psalm 51 records his prayer of repentance, including in verse 11 the words "take not thy holy spirit from me." In Old Testament times the Holy Spirit came on followers of God, but not permanently. From Pentecost onwards, the Spirit permanently dwells in Christians. It would be completely inappropriate for a Christian to use David's prayer today. Pentecost was indeed a key event!

The power of the event was demonstrated to non-believers by the God-given ability of these ordinary believers, not just to speak in a different dialect, but to speak a range of foreign languages as though they were native to each language. This was heard not just by a few but by a multitude of people. God had caused confusion of languages

because of man's arrogance displayed at the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11; now God the Holy Spirit further displays His control over languages at this time. Verse 7 of our chapter says that the people "were all amazed and marvelled".

Pentecost is significant from another aspect. In Acts 1:5, it is recorded that Jesus had said to His disciples: "ye shall be baptised with the Holy Ghost not many days hence." We need to be clear that the Bible phrase 'the baptism of the Holy Spirit' refers to Pentecost and to nothing else. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 the Bible says: "For by one Spirit are we all baptised into one body..." Nobody becomes part of the body of Christ until they receive the Holy Spirit on conversion. These Scriptures would combine to teach us that the church began at Pentecost and that, on conversion, when each Christian receives the Holy Spirit, a believer becomes part of the body of Christ, the church. When I am converted, it is not exactly that I am baptised with the Holy Spirit. As mentioned, that baptism of the Spirit took place once, at Pentecost. Rather, I think the idea is that on conversion I come into the good of the baptism of the Spirit, which has already taken place.

The wording of Acts 2:2-3 is interesting. In verse 2, it says that the sound from heaven "filled all the house." All the believers then living were present in that house and they all were immersed in that sound, just like being immersed in water at baptism. It wasn't an experience involving those outside the house; they were not believers. So this baptism of the Spirit formed the church. Then in verse 3 it says that the "cloven tongues like as of fire ... sat upon each of them." This would emphasise the aspect of the work of the Spirit in individual believers, empowering each for service for Christ.

I think it appropriate to consider further this important matter of when a born again believer receives the Holy Spirit. I start from the point that the epistles in the New Testament never ever refer to a Christian who does not have the indwelling Holy Spirit. This is the case even at Corinth where some believers were involved in very un-Christlike practices yet, as regards having the Holy Spirit, Paul does not distinguish between the believers there. For example, in 1 Corinthians 6:19 Paul writes: "know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God..." As far as possession of the Holy Spirit is concerned, they were all the same.

When writing to the Ephesians, if we take 1:13-14 and 4:30 together, Paul writes: (having believed) "ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance... sealed unto the day of redemption." The Spirit is the earnest or guarantee of what we have in Christ. He is God's seal to confirm that we have received the Gospel of our salvation. If we don't have the Spirit, we aren't sealed. If we aren't sealed, we don't belong to Christ. Dear Christian listener, don't strive to receive the Holy Spirit because, as a Christian, you already have Him!

I think some of the confusion on this matter arises because we forget the background to the Acts to which reference was made earlier. The book of the Acts represents a time of transition before the New Testament was written. It was also a time when God was demonstrating to the Jews that the Gospel of His grace is to all people on the basis of faith in Christ alone and this would be hard for some Jews to accept. Accordingly, after Pentecost in Acts 2, there are three other recorded instances in the book when the Holy Spirit comes into believers.

- First, in 8:14-17 believers in Samaria received the Spirit when the apostles Peter and John laid their hands on them.
- Second, in 10:44-48 the Spirit fell on the first Christian Gentiles in Caesarea as the apostle Peter spoke to them; verse 45 records that the Jews who had become Christians and were present on that occasion "were astonished ... because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost."
- Third, in 19:1-7, in Ephesus Paul found some believers who may previously have been disciples of John the Baptist but who certainly had been baptised to John's baptism. Paul the apostle laid his hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

Incidentally, the Holy Spirit and the Holy Ghost are terms used to describe the same Person.

At that time of change, God was sending out important messages to the Jews. The Jews and the Samaritans just did not get on. In Acts 8, there was a public demonstration to the Jews that Jews and Samaritans who believe in Christ are both indwelt by the same Holy Spirit. Jews could never have imagined that Gentiles who believed in Christ would have precisely the same position as Jews who believed in Christ. In Acts 10 they were being taught clearly that that is precisely the case and were astonished at the lesson. John the Baptist was a great man in the eyes of the Jews and in Acts 19 they were shown that John and his baptism merely pointed forwards towards Christ, that Christ is whom all believers follow and that the Holy Spirit indwells all believers. These Scriptures in Acts provide no support at all for the notion that a believer receives the Spirit at some later stage after conversion. If they did, they would contradict the clear message of the epistles and the Bible, God's Word, is incapable of contradiction. There was only one Pentecost at which the Spirit came to indwell all the believers, and subsequently immediately on the conversion of any Christian.

I should point out the difference between having the Spirit, which is a one-off event which took place at Pentecost and subsequently occurs on conversion, and being filled with the Spirit. More than once, both Peter and Paul were

described as being filled with the Spirit which therefore is a constant challenge to each believer to allow the Spirit to take control of their lives so that the fruit of the Spirit can be seen. At Pentecost, having and being filled occurred simultaneously - see 2:2-4.

Pentecost is a great subject and fundamental to Christian teaching. The church was formed then. The Holy Spirit, as great a Person as Christ, came to dwell in every believer, never on this earth to leave them, always to be alongside them, guide them into the truth and give them the power to live for Christ. Pentecost was truly a key event, not just in the Acts, but in the whole of God's dealings with man.

Today, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, let us rejoice in the fact that we are indeed indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Never let us lose the wonder of this fact - the Holy Spirit of God, the One co-equal with the Father and the Son in the triune God, actually lives inside the youngest believer in Christ. Let us so live in the power that He brings that our lives are Christ-like and Christ-honouring!

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