

Receiving for the Promise

*“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.”
Acts 2:1*

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A number of years ago, actually, 2 years BC (that is, before children), Laurie and I visited Ixtapa, on the Pacific coast of Mexico. Wanting to expand our horizons and travel experience, we took a day trip to Mexico City, touring the sites such as the Metropolitan Cathedral which overlooks the Plaza de la Constitucion; the sprawling model of Tenochtitlan, the ancient Aztec capitol city upon which the modern city is built, and of course, the Pyramid of the Sun. What an incredible feeling to climb to the top of this almost 2,000-year-old monument and imagine the great culture that had once been, and for just a moment to be transported back in time. Our tour of the city and pyramid complex was greatly enhanced by the presence of a young Mexican tour guide, who spoke perfect English and who was well versed in the history and culture of Mexico. Our tour guide was able to provide a lot of the back story, add color to our visit and explain why some things were the way they were.

I sometimes wish that it were mandated that every Christian church had a resident Messianic Jew who could act as a tour guide to enhance our reading, and understanding of the rich cultural and historical heritage we easily miss because of language and other barriers. We read our Bibles in English, and though we are blessed immeasurably by the efforts of translators, the constraints of our words can sometimes hide the deeper meanings of the Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic languages; and of course, we miss much of the cultural significance of feasts and other traditions that were part of the lives of those we are reading about. Even here, in Acts chapter two, we can skim over the events without being aware of the depth behind even the word Pentecost. For Christians, it just the day the Holy Spirit was poured out—it was the beginning of the church, a very ‘Christian’ event. However, it is far more than that.

Pentecost translates the Greek, meaning fifty, as in fifty days since Passover. The Hebrew name for it was Shavuot—the Festival of Weeks, or as is sometimes called the Day of Proclamation. Shavuot was one of the seven feasts prescribed by the Torah, and one of the three which demanded a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Thus, Jews from many lands would have swelled the population of Jerusalem during this time. The passage we read earlier from Leviticus 23 describes the feast and the practices surrounding it, including the counting of weeks after the Passover, and eventually the arrival of the fiftieth day. ‘Counting the omer’, came to describe the days between the Feast of First Fruits and the Feast of Weeks—what we know as Pentecost.

Although not specifically noted in the Scripture, the day of Pentecost also came to be associated with the proclamation of the Law at Sinai, and a series of traditions arose in Judaism around the details passed along through oral rather than written traditions. To be honest, there are many YouTube videos from teachers who are far more knowledgeable about the connections between the Jewish and Christian traditions that come together at Pentecost, however, I will do my best to highlight the ones that stood out for me this past week as I prepared for today, and conclude with three observations I hope will be an encouragement. First, there is this incredible unity that draws all of Scripture together. Secondly, we are given a window into seeing how God has dealt with mankind in the past. And then, third, the confidence we can have in God today.

The NIV simply states: *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.*

That is, the ‘omer’ had been counted, Shavuot was being celebrated, and the church was all together in one place. If we go back in our Bibles to Exodus 19 we are told: *“In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in*

front of the mountain.^a It could be said that all the people, all of Israel, was together in one place. What took place at Sinai has been described as a wedding. Israel is about to covenant—to betroth itself—to Yahweh. Moses, acting as a mediator (or priest), brings the word of the Lord to the people: *“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”*^b We say of Pentecost that it is the birth of the church, which the New Testament writers describe as “His bride”^c and “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God...”^d Just as Pentecost is the birth of the church, it is also the birth of Israel as a nation—and a nation identified as being the mediator between God and the world—a kingdom of priests—just as the church is a royal priesthood. We too are called to be God’s mediators, His ambassadors, in and to the world.

Notice that Israel pledges itself to abide by the covenant, before even knowing the details of the covenant. That will come in three days. That they say in verse 8 of Exodus, “We will do everything the LORD has said,” is a statement of some faith—though an uninformed faith. It is similar to what takes place at the altar in a wedding. A bride and groom pledge to stick together through good times and bad, through sickness and health, and to forsake all others—without knowing in that moment just how good or how bad it might get; or how sick the sickness might become; or the act of will it may take to forsake all others. The wedding vows are, in a way, an act of faith, though, an uninformed act of faith. I am amazed that God, who knew these peoples heart’s would always wander, and that they would grieve His heart many times, still pledged Himself to them.

Back in the upper room Acts continues.

² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Whether God carefully painted a story at the foot of Sinai that was vividly captured by the oral traditions, or God used the oral traditions to paint Pentecost in a way that would be familiar to the Jewish population in Jerusalem, we can’t be sure. However, just as they had been told in the traditions, the events that swirled around them were signs with which they were familiar. The wind and fire, the speaking in various languages—tongues—would have drawn the minds of the disciples and those in the city who witnessed it, back to the foot of Sinai. It would be helpful for us to mention a few, so let’s return to the mountain.

¹⁶ On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, ¹⁹ and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.”

Exodus 19:16-19

^a Exodus 19:1-2

^b Exodus 19:4-6

^c Revelation 19:7 (also 21:9, 22:7)

^d 1 Peter 2:9

According to tradition, the rabbis interpret the thunder of v16 as voices, as the Hebrew word can be translated as 'voice', as in Psalm 29:7, "*The Lord's shout (voice, thunder) strikes with flaming fire.*" They teach that in this moment Yahweh gave the Law in seventy languages—which was representative of all the languages on earth. Some rabbis go further, saying that God first offered the Law to other nations, but they refused it. We sometimes forget that many other peoples came out of Egypt with Israel, peoples who spoke other languages. Then there was the fire. Other traditions interpret the fire descending upon Sinai as a fire that descended upon the heads of the people gathered at the foot of Sinai. The reaction of the people in Exodus 20:18-19, "*When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die,"*" is, as noted by the rabbis, an interruption in Yahweh's giving the Law.

It was, they say, an early indication that Israel was not yet ready to receive the Law, they were still filled with too much Egypt. They were an unprepared bride. Their later actions when Moses tarried on the mountain, building themselves an idol in the form of a Golden Calf, followed by much grumbling, other indications they were simply not ready. This is perhaps painted for us in the Festival of First Fruits—when they were instructed to bring to the priest a sheaf of the first gleanings, which would be oats, and which would apparently not be fit for humans but was more for animals. So, what we have in the period between the festivals—the bridge in time—as one rabbi describes it, as the counting of the omer is taking place, is a portrait of the time between Sinai and Pentecost.

You see, at Pentecost, Shavuot, the people would once again make pilgrimage to the place God designated, they would come before the priest and this time offer not a sheaf of oats—something unfit for consumption—but two loaves of leavened bread made from fine wheat. Messianic Jews see the two loaves as representing the Jew and the Gentile, Jews for Jesus noting:

...the inclusion of the Gentiles completed the symbolism of the wave offering, where the High Priest offered two loaves of fine wheat flour baked with leaven. Centuries before it came to pass, the two loaves of the wave offering symbolized the Body of Messiah made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers.¹

The two loaves have been carefully and meticulously prepared. There is a completeness about the bread made with all its ingredients, that was clearly absent in the unleavened loaves. As Paul would later write: "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,"^e and to another church, "we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."^f Through the agency of the Holy Spirit, Babel is undone, and once again man is united before God with a new heart and spirit that instills a desire to live in accordance with the will of God.

And while the nation at Sinai was told to stay back from the mountain lest they die, for they were not yet ready—on the day of Pentecost in Acts, the mountain came to man. In that upper room, a people made ready by the teachings of Jesus, were now ready to receive the indwelling Spirit who took from them hearts of stone and gave them hearts of flesh so as, as in the words of the prophet, "*I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.*"^g

^e Ephesians 2:14

^f 1 Corinthians 12:13 (One of the many verses, I might add, that those embracing the divisive Critical Race Theory would do well to understand)

^g Ezekiel 36:27

There was something else that took place on Shavuot that gave it the name ‘the day of Proclamation.’ Along with the receiving of the Law—the proclamation of God—traditionally on Shavout the worshiper would bring his offering and before the priest would recite the events that had brought Israel to the land of promise, as recorded in Deuteronomy 26:5-10. On the day of Pentecost, Peter also made a proclamation, only he proclaimed the events that indicated the fulfillment of a greater promise. First, he made his proclamation to “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem...”, so this announcement wasn’t applicable just to one people. He then recounted the prophecy of Joel^h, indicating they were witnessing its fulfillment and then pointed to the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As the Jews for Jesus website notes, “As we celebrate the birthday of the Church, we would do well to contemplate the fact that our primary purpose is to proclaim the gospel.² Although the Law has not been done away with, no one can be declared righteous in His sight by observing the Lawⁱ, however, now there is the proclamation of the gospel, whereby we are proclaimed righteous through faith in Christ.^j

The big thing not to be missed though in Peter’s Pentecost sermon is Peter. This is the guy who was intimidated by a servant girl sitting around a campfire on the night of the arrest, and who fled and hid in shame and fear. Now he standing up in front of a crowd and proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. How is that possible? What has led all of the one hundred and twenty from the upper room to the streets, and some will say, out from the shadows and into the temple? As the song says:

WHO is it tells me what to do
And helps me to obey?
Who is it plans the route for me
And will not let me stray?
Who is it tells me when to speak
And what I ought to say?
That's the Spirit! Holy Spirit!
That's the Spirit of the Lord in me!

What was the result of this Spirit empowered proclamation by Peter?

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

³⁸ Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Acts 2:37-39

Jesus had told the disciples to wait for the promise, they had waited and now had received, and it changed everything. Without the Spirit the disciples would have fared as well as the Seven sons of Sceva, who fled in seven directions when jumped upon by a man possessed by an evil spirit. What was it the spirit said: “*Jesus I know, and I know Paul, but who are you?*”^k Paul too new that his preaching was in vain if not empowered by the Holy Spirit. He wrote to the Corinthians: “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with

^h Joel 2:28-29

ⁱ Romans 3:20

^j Galatians 2:16

^k Acts 19:14-16

a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."¹

AW Tozer would say of the early church:

It was not an easy task which the Church faced when she came down from that upper room. To carry on the work of a man who was known to have died—to have died as criminals die—and more than that, to persuade others that this man had risen again from the dead and that He was the Son of God and Saviour: this mission was, in the nature of it, doomed to failure from the start.³

That's a wonderfully concise and accurate statement about the prospects of the early church. On the surface it was a hopeless task. It was, as another said, foolishness. And yet, that ragtag bunch of misfits would begin a movement that changed the world. When Peter's words fell upon those gathered that day they were cut to the heart. They knew a response was necessary—"Brothers, what shall we do?" Just look at Peter's sermon. Although we don't have the full text, being told in verse 40, "With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them..." the entire message is less than seven hundred words. There were no clever illustrations. No fancy PowerPoint slides. No one had sung a moving selection from Hillsong, nor had there been a tear inducing video. You see, it wasn't the words of Peter, it was the power in those words. It was the Holy Spirit.

Tozer goes on to write:

If we ever again impress unsaved men with a wholesome fear of the supernatural we must have once more the dignity of the Holy Spirit; we must know again that awe-inspiring mystery which comes upon men and churches when they are full of the power of God.⁴

Let's not make the mistake of thinking we can do what the early church did without the Holy Spirit. That with the right programs; with clever preaching; edgy worship; carefully crafted Bible studies, we will make the lasting impact made by a group of uneducated fishermen, civil servants, and women.

I don't know about you, but I know that the past year has at times just about undone me. There have been days when just getting out of bed has been difficult, and when I have felt totally inadequate for any task. It seems that every part of our lives was shaken, from visiting with family or friends; going to church; going to a movie or a hockey game—every routine, every past time, every activity, was altered or taken away, and some may never look the same. When Jerusalem finally fell, the temple was destroyed, and the people taken into exile, I'm sure they felt many of the same things we are feeling right now. Would there ever be a return to normal? What will the future look like? I think we can draw encouragement from what we read of the day of Pentecost. Just to return to the three observations referred to earlier.

First, seeing the incredible unity that draws all of Scripture together, were Feasts inaugurated in a far distant age can portray events in a near distant age, and we can see being lived out up to the present, should surely give us confidence that God is in control. History is His story. Secondly, seeing how God's dealings with man in the past display His good intentions for mankind, are a good indicator as to how He will deal in the future. His plans are for our good. We can see in the Feasts that His longing was and is for a people whose heart was for Him above all things. And then, lastly, having seen the fulfilment of the promises Israel had been given, we can be confident in the fulfilment of the promises we have been given. We can be

¹ 1 Corinthians 2:4-5

assured that just as they saw Him ascend into Heaven, one day we shall all witness His return, and that we will be with Him forever. The Holy Spirit is truly “a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance...”^m

It was out of the ashes of the exile that the synagogue arose. With the tearing down of the temple and the way worship had been, Israel found a whole new way of gathering for worship, of celebrating the Feasts, of ensuring future generations learned about Yahweh. One rabbi pointing out: *Shavuot* became a day when children were introduced to the study of Torah, and when small children learned the aleph bet; often being given honey and sweets so that God’s Word tastes even sweeter!⁵ Though things were different and, in many ways, didn’t go back to the way they were, the people thrived and adapted to new ways.

As we emerge from this pandemic, things may look different. They may never go back to the way they were. That can be scary. But, on the day of Pentecost God began to work in a way He had not worked before. A way that fulfilled the prayer of Moses, “I wish that all the LORD’S people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!”ⁿ This, right now, is an exciting time. A time when many the things we have come to depend upon that are other than God, have been stripped away. We have seen over this past year just how thin is the veneer of civility in our age, how quickly anarchy can rush in. This is a time when once again the world is desperate for a Spirit-filled church to arise, a church lead not by the traditions of men, but by the Spirit of God.

In a few weeks we will once again begin to open stores, open theatres, open our churches. The temptation will be to go back to doing what we have always done. However, is it possible God is once again looking to do a new thing? Although we can’t gather together for prayer at the moment, we can all pray, we can all unite in our prayers. Will you join me in praying, in ‘counting the omer’, for a new Pentecost? Will you vow to take time each day until we are once again able to gather, to pray that when we do gather, we do so with the intent and purpose of receiving power from on high?

I hope and pray this morning, that knowing more of the story of Pentecost will enhance your appreciation of this Feast, and give you a sense of awe at the workings of God and the glory of the scarlet thread woven throughout His story. I pray that you will seek out the Divine tour guide, to lead you into a deeper and more meaningful relationship with our Lord, and that being filled with His Spirit, you will better understand the richness of the heritage to which we are called.

Let’s unite for a moment in prayer right now.

Heavenly Father, God above all, Giver and Sustainer of all life, we gather and bow before Your holy mountain this day, and await a fresh encounter with Your Holy Spirit. May the fire that burned upon Sinai and was shed upon the church in Jerusalem, burn within us. Fill us with Your fire, burning up every trace of sin and sanctifying us for service.

Empower us Holy God, to go forth into the world with the boldness of our forefathers, unafraid to proclaim the person of Your Son, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. May His character and love be burned into our souls that we “with unveiled faces reflect the Lord’s glory, being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”^o

^m Ephesians 1:14

ⁿ Numbers 11:29

^o 2 Cor 3:18

Lord Jesus, we thank you for Your love and grace, demonstrated by Your death upon the cross, and for being victorious over even death through Your resurrection. May You grant to us a faith and fervor that proclaims the message of the cross to a dying world, that whosoever will believe in You, will have everlasting life.

Amen

BURNING, burning, brightly burning,
Brightly burning fire divine,
Satisfy my spirit's yearning.
Fill this empty soul of mine.

May your soul's desire this morning be satiated with holy fire.

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Endnotes:

¹ <https://jewsforjesus.org/jewish-resources/jewish-holidays/shavuot/>

² <https://jewsforjesus.org/jewish-resources/jewish-holidays/shavuot/>

³ Tozer, A. W.. Paths to Power: Living in the Spirit's Fullness (pp. 5-6). CrossReach Publications. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Tozer, A. W.. Paths to Power: Living in the Spirit's Fullness (p. 9). CrossReach Publications. Kindle Edition.

⁵ <https://jewsforjesus.org/jewish-resources/jewish-holidays/shavuot/>