

ACTS 2

THE LORD RESHAPES THE PENTECOST FESTIVAL

Pentecost

Chapter 2 in the book of Acts has frequently caught the attention of students of the New Testament, for it is here that the power of the Holy Ghost begins to show itself in the life of the nascent Church as the Resurrected Christ had promised (Acts 1:8). The Apostles, whose number was newly completed with Matthias as the replacement for the fallen Judas (1:26), had gathered with other Church members at the Jerusalem temple. They had probably assembled on the east side of the huge Court of the Gentiles under Solomon's Porch, a favorite spot for Church members to gather (3:11; 5:12). Precisely on "the day of Pentecost . . . they were all with one accord in one place" (2:1). At this moment, the Lord chose to seize the attention of everyone who would pay attention: "Suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind." This was not the whole event because next, "there appeared unto them cloven tongues of fire, and it sat upon each of [the Twelve]." As a capstone, "they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues" (2:2–4). In effect, the Lord had set an attention-grabbing table.

Pentecost is the Israelite holiday that occurs fifty days after Passover and celebrates the first fruits of harvest, usually barley, which at the time of the celebration stood in local fields "white already to harvest" (John 4:35). In Greek, the day is termed *pentēkostē*, signifying fifty. In Hebrew, it is called *shavu'ot*, meaning "weeks," with the sense that this special day falls a week of weeks after Passover. All Israelite men were under obligation to come to this festival, if at all possible, as well as to Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles.¹ Naturally, not all could make the three journeys each year. Many had to choose which celebration they would attend, if any, as did Paul when he traveled to Jerusalem for the last time, leaving from Greece to attend Pentecost (Acts 20:16).

For this one-day event, Jewish people gathered from all over the known world, basically from southern Iraq to western Spain. This is exactly what we see in the foreign languages of the Jews whom Luke lists

as guests at the temple that day (Acts 2:9–11). Importantly, “proselytes” joined them—that is, Gentiles who were attracted to the synagogue as a worthwhile institution of worship and moral instruction (2:10). Non-Jews such as these were the people that Paul regularly gathered to himself as a missionary.

Fire and the Holy Ghost

The tongues of fire that had come to rest on the Twelve attracted much of the huge, gathered crowd to the part of the temple grounds where the believers had gathered, as did the fast-spreading news of the event—“when this was noised abroad” (Acts 2:6). What was just as impressive was the fact that the Twelve, all Galileans (which was evidently known by their accents), were speaking in the foreign tongues of the guests (Acts 2:7; Matthew 26:73). With the multitude suitably impressed and even confused—“What meaneth this?” (Acts 2:12)—Peter stepped forward and, in a loud voice, addressed the massive audience. Quoting the words of the prophet Joel about coming spiritual manifestations, he quickly introduced his hearers to “Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you” (2:22). It was He, Peter affirmed, “whom God hath made . . . both Lord and Christ” (2:36). Moreover, as Peter had reminded his audience just moments earlier, what they had just witnessed was an experience with the Holy Ghost that Christ had “shed forth” and “which ye now see and hear” (2:33). In a word, they were witnesses to a divine manifestation tied to Jesus Christ. At this, “they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and . . . the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (2:37). The Lord was about to feed the multitude from His table.

Peter and his associates were ready for the question, “What shall we do?” The needed actions were simple: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins,” he intoned, “and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (2:38). The result? Those who then “gladly received his word were baptized: and that same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls” (2:41). Most of these people, of course, were from out of town. A few hundred surely resided in Jerusalem and became the foundation of the Church in the capital city. We hear of them later among “the multitude of them that believed” (4:31), among the widows of “the Grecians” and “the Hebrews” (6:1), among the “great company of the priests [who] were obedient to the faith” (6:7), among those gathered in “the house of Mary” (12:12), and among “the sect of the Pharisees that believed” (15:5).

Two Questions

A question presses for an answer. Why didn’t the authorities intervene in events that were occurring under their noses, within the temple grounds? The response is that they were totally distracted by all that was happening near the sanctuary, far from Solomon’s Porch. Visitors had come by the thousands to pay their temple tax and to offer sacrifices. The business of exchanging coins and selling animals all took place without the direct involvement of temple officials. But they certainly played a supervisory role, even if it was

with a light touch. What is more, the heavy duty of the priests during this one-day festival took place especially in the large courtyard that surrounded the sanctuary where thousands of animals were slain, properly bled, skillfully hung and flayed, and then burned on the great altar that stood next to place where all this slaughtering took place. In a word, temple authorities were under tremendous pressure to meet the needs of the gathered throng of worshippers, most all of whom needed to offer at least one sacrifice on that day.

We now come to another important question. What happened to all the worshippers who came from out of town? Answer: they all went home. But thousands of them carried in their minds the memories of that day near Solomon's Porch and, more significantly, carried in their hearts the Holy Ghost. It was as if sparks of divine light were scattered across the Mediterranean Sea and throughout Egypt and the eastern deserts toward Iraq and the mountains and shores of Asia Minor to the north. These believing people would be in place when Paul and other missionaries rolled into their cities and towns and hamlets, providing the traveling ministers with warm, receptive hearts. The Lord had set His table on an important day in the lives of thousands of the Jewish faithful, had fed them from His spiritual bounty, and then sent them home filled with His light. There is more

The rest of the story unfolds at the top and the bottom of the Mount of Olives. But the timing of this episode is important. The Lord's plan began to unfold about the time that the pilgrims from far lands began to arrive for Pentecost. These people were under obligation to arrive a week early for purifying purposes (John 11:55). If we count the fifty days from Passover to Pentecost, we find ourselves up against Jesus's Crucifixion, which happened the day after Passover began. For the next three days or so of the fifty, Jesus's body lay in the tomb. We then add the forty days that Jesus spent with the Eleven before His Ascension (Acts 1:3). By the time of the Ascension, forty-three or forty-four days had passed of the fifty that are reckoned for Pentecost. By this moment, numbers of pilgrims had begun to arrive at Jerusalem to purify themselves for the sacred festival. Because the Kidron Valley at the base of the Mount of Olives was a favorite camping place for the crowds that came from afar, we see in our mind's eye people camping at the bottom of the mount exactly when Jesus and the Eleven met for the last time on the top of the mount before He ascended into heaven. Little did those visitors from distant places know that the Risen Christ, meeting with His trusted disciples a few hundred feet above them, would orchestrate events that within a few days would send them to their homes with an unlooked for and memorable spiritual witness.

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Note

- 1 Exodus 23:14–17; 34:18–24; Deuteronomy 16:16.

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