

The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit

In this lecture, the main concern will be the question of what the Holy Spirit is doing in Acts, how that is being described, and what the Old Testament background is for the references to John the Baptist and Jesus. I want to read to you one passage from the Old Testament that speaks about this anticipation of an end time outpouring of the Spirit of God. Ezekiel 36:26 says, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my Laws.” Ezekiel 37 has a very similar passage. When Peter speaks in Jerusalem, he quotes from Joel chapter two. This passage is very similar to what I just read from Ezekiel. I know I am not looking at the total context, although with Joel we will do that in a little while. Joel 2:28-32, says:

And afterward,
 I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
 your old men will dream dreams,
 your young men will see visions.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
 I will pour out my Spirit in those days.
I will show wonders in the heavens
 and on earth,
 blood and fire and billows of smoke.
The sun will be turned to darkness
 and the moon to blood
 before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.

And this is the final point of Peter's quote of Joel: “And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.” There are many more references to this anticipated outpouring of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament, but these are two significant passages.

Let us reflect a little on the state of the covenant people of God when the Spirit is being poured out upon God's people. I believe it is true to say that the covenant people of Israel were under the regenerating Spirit of God, but something went seriously wrong—so wrong that God sent John the Baptist to call the entire people of Israel to repentance. When you call people to repentance, you normally imply that they have turned, in a very serious way, from God, from His Ways, and from His purposes. In fact, John the Baptist speaks of judgment. He speaks of the visitation of God, and he calls the people to return to God. It is wonderful and comforting to know that the context of the Joel citation is that of a call to repentance—a call to come back. It is within the context of God calling His people back to Himself and then equipping them for His purposes. We need to understand, as we look at the situation of God's people, that while they are under His covenant blessing, they are challenged to return so that they can accept the ministry and atoning work of Christ. Then receiving the Spirit will equip them to be the kind of witnesses that we have just discussed in Acts 1:8.

I affirm that there is a regenerative presence of the Spirit of God among the people of Israel prior to Pentecost. However, I believe that the outpouring of the Spirit, as described in Pentecost in Acts two and then throughout Acts, does not only speak about an outpouring of the Spirit of power upon His people, but actually speaks about receiving the Spirit of God. Some Gentiles even receive the Spirit of God. So I am affirming the regeneration of the old covenant people, but I am also saying that there is a particular filling of the Spirit that is indiscriminate, that is deep, and that is moving the people in their hearts. I see

the progression of God's work with His people to go deeper and deeper to the heart. Yes, God has always longed for a people according to His own heart and He has accomplished that in many ways in the Old Testament. For instance, I was surprised to find that the purpose in the Old Testament is not to be circumcised in the flesh only, but also to be circumcised in the heart. So the reference in the Old Testament is not just in anticipation of the New Testament that now we would be circumcised in our hearts and dedicated to God. No, it is the purpose in the old covenant among the people of Israel to be dedicated to their God, but there is a deepening of this after Jesus' life and the day of Pentecost.

When Jesus speaks about the purposes of the laws of God, the purity of God's ways in the Sermon on the Mount, I see that God is going deeper. There is this movement of instructing His people to the heart, and that is what I see is accomplished here at Pentecost; God is reaching deep down into the heart. God is changing their hearts of stone to hearts of flesh and writing His ways into their hearts so that they may be the people He has always intended. Thus I see a progression—I do not see an antithesis. I do not see that there was no Spirit among the people of Israel and now suddenly there is. But I also do not see that this is just an outpouring of the Spirit of power and witness. There is more that is happening in Acts with Gentiles that speaks of the fact that the Spirit of God now moves in a deeper sense among Jewish and Gentile hearts alike.

If you were asked, “What were the Jews anticipating at Pentecost?” What would you answer? What were they celebrating when they came together for one of their major Jewish feasts? The feast of Pentecost was the Feast of First Fruits; it was a harvest thanksgiving celebration. It celebrated that God was faithful in His provision for His people. Pentecost was celebrated after the Passover, showing that God, having saved His people out of slavery and having passed over them because of the blood on the doors, now led further. God did not only save us, but He also provided for us. He kept us and was faithful to us. Some say that when the Jews celebrated Pentecost, they also commemorated the giving of the Mosaic Law in Sinai. If that is so, Pentecost gains even greater significance. Passover is now fulfilled by Christ being the final Passover Lamb. Pentecost is now fulfilled by the giving of the Law: God's ways and purposes; His good and helpful, protective law—not written on tablets of stone, but on human hearts. Thus the people of God would not only be the recipients of His mercy, but also His provision and enablement to grow in godliness so as to reflect the character of God. So I submit to you, not as an absolute proven analysis of the meaning of Pentecost, but as the Jewish understanding of Pentecost as a sequel to the Exodus—as a sequel to salvation—that the Pentecost shows God providing salvific and helpful instruction for life.

I do not want to lead you in the direction of thinking that the instructions of God are given without His provision. It is the wonderful glory of God's salvation that He says, “This is the way and I will take you. These are the instructions and I will teach you.” It is the most merciful way of the Father, who says “We will learn this and I will teach you.” Not, “This is the way to go, now do it.” That is the self-centered understanding of God's instructions, but God, in His mercy and kindness, calls us to Himself and then takes us with Him to live out His ways. Some of the passages that I just read to you from the Old Testament seem to indicate that. Jeremiah 31:31-34 says, “‘The time is coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts... For I will forgive their wickedness, and will remember their sins no longer.’” This is a wonderful affirmation of the salvation and the purpose of Salvation—godliness. I believe that some of this is in the background as the disciples wait in Jerusalem, as the Spirit of God is being poured out. What is happening here is a fulfillment of Sinai, of God writing His instruction on their hearts. This dovetails beautifully with the Sermon on the Mount. If you mistake the Sermon on the Mount as a new law, you will be wrong. If you disregard the Sermon on the Mount as simply some interesting instructions that nobody needs to care about or follow, you are wrong as well.

You are falling into legalism on the one hand and into antinomianism on the other. The Gospel is neither legalistic nor anti-law. The Gospel enables a godly life.

Thus as Pentecost happens, something significant happens in this enablement to live out the goodness of God's instructions by His provision. We cannot fulfill His law on our own, but by the provision that God gives us. And so I believe this is part of the background now as we reflect on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. That is what I would call the salvation/historical place of Pentecost. I think it is good for us always to ask, "Why is this happening?" Do not take things for granted or say, "Pentecost, yes I understand that. Everybody knows Pentecost." Ask, "Why? What is going on? What is the background? What is God pursuing? God draws straight lines with you. You and I resist those straight lines. But He draws straight lines and they go across our plans, across our wishes, across our secret designs, across our limitations, and across our barriers. They push against those things, and this is one of those lines. God is pursuing a people unto His own heart, enabling them to witness for Him. I think it is important for us to understand what is happening here in that larger, overarching design of God in calling a people to Himself.

Another wonderful part of Pentecost is the salvation historical factor here. Who is in Jerusalem at Pentecost when this outpouring of the Spirit happens? Everybody from the known world: Palestinian Jews and Diaspora Jews from Alexandria, the rest of northern Africa, Asia Minor, and Rome. There were also proselytes, Gentiles who had converted to the Jewish faith and were taken in by circumcision and confession, and possibly God-fearing Greeks. The Diaspora with the Babylonian exile has continued, and Jews have been moved all across the Greco-Roman world. For times of rededication they return on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This is one of those celebrations. They are not accidentally in Jerusalem when Peter and the others experience the outpouring. They are there for a celebration of Pentecost as one of the significant events in the Jewish calendar, particularly for those Jews who lived far off. The Diaspora Jews were returning to their homeland to remember God's faithfulness. When exposed to the rest of the world, they tended to forget the faithfulness of God, the provision of God, and the grace of God in giving them His law and calling them as His people, so they came back to remember. In fact, there is a strong Diaspora Jewish tradition that enables and encourages repetition and remembering of God's deeds; it is one of the features of Diaspora Judaism. They remind each other of God's faithfulness, and that is happening here in Jerusalem at the time of Pentecost. Thus what you have here is a congregation of the dispersed Jews in Jerusalem collected to celebrate the First Fruits, and also probably to commemorate the giving of the Law of Moses. And at that very point, the Spirit of God is poured out upon those who witness to Christ, and potentially upon those who hear, in Jerusalem.

That is a fantastic beginning to the evangelistic expansion of the messianic faith. They did not go out, but all the people came to them. You might be surprised to find Christians in Rome, Colossae, and other places where Paul or others of the disciples had not yet been. When we are surprised by this we are forgetting that the first major evangelistic session happened in Acts chapter two where many people came to believe, through the sermon of Peter, the Pentecost speech. Then those new converts to Christianity went back to their countries and the fire spread out from there. It was like a big congregation of witnesses joined in Jerusalem, congregated to remember something great and receiving something greater. While they remembered God's faithfulness and law-giving, they received God's wonderful faithfulness and His Spirit, who would write God's laws onto their hearts. Then they went out and spread their faith.

As we study the description of the outpouring of the Spirit in more detail, we find some interesting things. I want to emphasize, as we get into that tender subject of the work of the Holy Spirit in Acts, that

I truly do not want to offend anyone who has a different take on this particular area of the work and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. I will try to tread carefully.

The first thing I observe in the description in Acts two of the outpouring of the Spirit is that the phenomenon of speaking in tongues is clearly a phenomenon of foreign languages. The outpouring of the Spirit leads to speaking in tongues, but when you look at what these tongues are, they are actually identified as languages. There is a reference to tongues, for instance, in Acts 2:4: “And all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” There you still are not sure what is meant by tongues, but in verse eight it says, “Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?” The Greek for “native language” is *dialecto*, but “language” is a proper translation here because if you look at all the ethnic groups represented here, you will find that there are not just dialects. Some may ask, “Would not most of those Jews have understood one language?” I doubt it. Yes, most of them were Jews, but 200 or so years before Pentecost, ministers among the Jewish people had found it necessary to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek because many Jews did not understand Hebrew. So I think there is good reason to assume that there was a language plurality among the Diaspora Jews. Perhaps they understood some Hebrew as it was read, but they would certainly have been more conversant in their indigenous languages.

Thus what we have here is a reversal of Babel. We have the mirror image of the dispersion and separation of men. Babel happened because of man’s self aggrandizement, saying, “I will be the chief.” Therefore, God put a spirit of confusion among them and multiplied the languages, which has grieved mankind ever since. Here we see that reversed. The apostolic witnesses, the first group of those who received the Spirit, speak in those languages so that all the people understand. What is the first thing they do? They worship. They give testimony to the great deeds of God. Keeping in mind this salvation/historical background of remembering the goodness of God and His greatness, that is what they speak about. Its purpose is not to confuse, but to instruct. Rather than indiscernible, it is now understandable, and communicates the common salvation in God. There is not one language established, which would be a total reversal of Babel, but there is a means of understanding symbolized here that draws the people to understanding, in their own language, the great deeds of God. I think there are various factors involved in this phenomenon, but one thing I know from having been in different nations: if you go to a foreign nation and you can speak in the language of your host nation, you have access to the heart. If you do not, it is very difficult to communicate. To speak the language is to address the heart personally, and that is what God is manifesting here through this miracle. I do not believe that this is an auditory miracle, but the apostles speak in the languages of the people and then the people hear them speak.

This miracle, among other things, shows the merciful kindness and reach of God. No matter what ethnic, language, or cultural background, God's arm reaches far enough. The mercy of God is going out, and so it demonstrates this reach—this evangelistic and missionary reach that is very clear. We could look through all the description here in chapter two of who is actually present, and what you get is basically a map of the Greco-Roman world surrounding the Mediterranean. This has been an introduction, a little background, on this outpouring of the Spirit.

We find a certain pattern that I think is significant as you look at Acts. There is not a standard modality by which the Spirit of God works. You will not find an instruction that says, “This and this and this and this will always happen and that is the standard established here.” Only one standard is established and that can be found in Acts 2:38: “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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” Everyone who

repents and believes receives the Spirit of God. The end product is always the same, but the modality of how you get there (by the laying on of hands or not, etc.) is extremely varied. You need to be careful that you do not become dogmatic on the modality. What you will be able to say and trust is that, everyone who is moved by the Spirit of God to faith and repentance to be baptized will also receive the Spirit of God, regardless of origin. And while I see that there is a particular equipping for witness, I believe that there is more in this outpouring of the Spirit that is really a movement of the heart.

Pentecost has some unique aspects that are not repeated (the divided tongues, for instance). However, other aspects are repeated. There is a particular parallelism between Acts chapters two and ten. Chapter ten describes the conversion of the household of Cornelius and the amazing fact that these unclean people are identified as clean because of what God has done. There is a connection between purity and the Spirit of God. Purity is not achieved by their own godliness, but by an understanding of the atoning work of Christ on their behalf, and then by the Spirit of God falling on them. For Peter, when he looks at Cornelius and his household, these unclean people, the Spirit of God having fallen upon them is a sure proof that God, through Christ, has purified them. That is an important point of parallelism between Acts two and ten—the Spirit of God being poured out. I would strongly encourage you to be careful when you think about how this work of the Spirit of God is to happen. Do not become dogmatic about and insistent upon one particular way. I will suggest to you a few ways to look at this particular phenomenon.

In Acts two we see the outpouring of the Spirit. We see the apostles speaking in tongues as languages, and we see that this is enabling a witness that goes out. Now that we see this beginning movement of God's Spirit in Acts two, how does this unfold in Acts? What do we find in the rest of Acts? The references to the further work of the Spirit are mainly in chapter 2 and in 8:14-ff, 9:17, 10:44-ff, and 19:1-ff.

I want to make you aware of what is happening in Acts. I would like to compare it with four people with different backgrounds deciding to start a business together. Person number one has just recently gone bankrupt. That person is excited about making a new business deal with these three other strong people. The second person has done extremely well in businesses and is just looking to add on to this success by starting another one. The third person has always done just well enough, but he is conscientious. The fourth person is a risk-taker who has had some good years and some bad years. These four people are sitting at the table discussing how to start a business. Each person that I have described will bring something different to the table, to that common goal of beginning a business. They will not bring all the same abilities. They will not go through the same process of putting this business plan together. Maybe some will have a clever idea; maybe the man who went bankrupt could contribute an interesting idea that will finally work. One of the other men who has the finances will hopefully provide some starting capital. So you see that there is a variety of people working together.

Obviously that example does not work very well, but I want to make you aware that Acts is like one big funnel. God has his arms open and says, "Wherever you come from, come here (Acts 2:38). Repent, turn, be baptized, believe in Christ, give your life to Christ, and you will receive the Spirit of God." That is the bottom part of this funnel. That is the common denominator. One of the mistakes that can be made in interpreting Acts is to say, "The way this one person went is the way everyone needs to go." To go back to this rather feeble image of the business people, we might say, "Good ideas are what we need. Everyone must bring good ideas." Or, "Everyone must bring money." That would exclude the first man who has just gone bankrupt. In Acts we see people coming by many processes to this culmination point of God's gathering. They form one covenant people made out of Jews and Gentiles from different backgrounds and with different baggage. They come to that point of having a soft heart, an

impressionable heart—a heart that is movable, by the Spirit of God, toward His work and the purposes of glorifying Him. Acts is not about prescribing to one group or another how this process ought to happen. I would submit to you and beg you to consider that Acts shows a variety of ways in which God works because people are at different places. God includes various ethnic and geographical groups, taking them from where they are, from different roads, to the same ending place. The mode, the way that the Spirit works in one group, is different for another group. That is an introduction to the multiplicity of what is happening here in Acts. We should not read through Acts and say, “This is the way the Spirit of God must operate.”

There is a narrative relativizing of details and a narrative confirmation or repetition of central issues in Acts. I would submit that to you particularly with regard to your understanding of the operation of the Spirit of God. How sad it is that we are divided about the Spirit of God. We need to be careful as we interpret Acts to recognize that in one area of Acts the Holy Spirit acts one way, and in another area He acts a different way. In Acts ten, there is no laying on of hands. In fact, water baptism follows receiving of the Spirit of God. There are many different modes, so how can we make firm rules about the modality of how God's Spirit works from that? All you need to say is, “How wonderful! God accomplishes His purposes with each group, in individualized, unique, and varied ways, but the end point is common.” If you read Acts from the result you will be astonished and happy. You will be surprised to see that everyone who is warmed by the Spirit of God has the Spirit of God. We need to approach these very tender areas, particularly Acts 8 and Acts 19, by asking these questions: “What is happening?” “What group are we in?” “What history are we dealing with?” You will see that with Acts 8 and 19, and also with Acts 10, we are in different histories and contexts. I believe that Acts has the sub-purpose of showing different groups of people and how they are brought into the one covenant people of God, Jew and Gentile alike, representing Palestinian Jews, Diaspora Jews, Samaritans, God-fearing Gentiles (Acts ten), and also disciples of John the Baptist in Asia Minor (which has a lot of speculation and mythology) in Acts 19.

Thus in Acts we see all kinds of different groups and how they are brought into the one people. Whatever advantage the Jewish people would have had or whatever disadvantage the Samaritans (a mixed group) or Gentiles would have had, now that God is providing the fulfillment of His Promises, everybody is on common ground. Everyone has the unmerited, pure grace of God's love available to them. We are all beggars. We are all dependent. We are all recipients. We bring nothing. The Gospel is really very simple. This is the righteousness and purity of God. The ultimate purpose of Acts, then, is to bring people to worship the living God and to spread that Gospel message through internal and external growth. You could perhaps argue with Romans that the Jews have had many advantages; they are the covenant people, they have received the Torah, they know of the temple of God, etc. And then there are some tribes who have heard nothing about God's purposes. In human terms, there is a qualitative difference between these people, or groups of people. What God has done in sending Christ and pouring out His Spirit, in the way that we read in Acts, is to have put all of these accomplishments to naught and establish one ground entrance. There is no achievement, only reception—receiving that which Christ has provided through His life and death—through His atoning work and provision.

That is why I went a little slowly through the first chapter of Acts—through waiting and receiving, being filled and equipped. That is the ground rule so that the over achievers and the under achievers are receiving access to godliness, to the great righteousness of God, on completely equal grounds. Some people may be hard pressed to give up all their perceived merit. They might say, “Wait a minute! I have achieved, done, contributed, and provided so much.” The parable of the Prodigal Son plays in here, as we see the older brother in this person who is saying, “I do not need the merit of Christ. I have my own merit.” That is why Jesus says, “I have come for the sick and the needy. I have not come for the

righteous.” This is an ironic statement for those who consider themselves righteous, who think that they only need to achieve a little more in order to reach the goal. The problem is that no one can ever bridge that gap because it is actually two thousand more miles up.

This is what is happening in Acts: God is bringing in His flock from wherever they are—bringing them to that point of common grace. This is not common grace in the general sense, but grace for all—God calling His people out of all kinds of groups. I think that is important. In the next lecture when we briefly look at Acts chapters 8 and 19, where we will see unusual things happening, we need to reflect on that and keep that in our minds so that we do not divide among ourselves and in our churches in unnecessary ways over these issues. The person who feels very deficient and the person who feels very accomplished both reach the level of God's righteousness by being taken through Christ's atonement. So it is not about everyone being leveled to the ground, but about everyone being brought to godliness only through faith in Christ.