

What Happened on Pentecost?

On Pentecost the Holy Spirit came into the world to live with all those who follow Jesus. Jesus told his followers what it was going to be like, having the Holy Spirit in the world. He said,

when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.
(John 16:13)

How does this seem to you? Suppose I substituted the name of a person, like for instance “Charlie” for the Spirit. Jesus would have been saying something like,

I’m going to send Charlie to help you tell what’s true and what’s not. He’s not going to give you his own opinion, but he’ll tell you just what I tell him to say.

It seems to me that Charlie would be a really handy person to know, and somebody I’d like to call on from time to time.

What does the Spirit do?

What might the equivalent of Charlie’s job be in the modern world? In some ways he’s a lot like an investigative reporter. He goes to the source, interviews the ones who know what’s going on, and then passes it on to the rest of us, in terms we can understand. Jesus says,

He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.
(John 16:14)

So Charlie’s assignment is to take all that belongs to Jesus—his teachings, his work, his example, his life—and help us understand it. Then, as a result of what we understand, we’ll see how purely good and wonderful and deserving of admiration Jesus really is.

Charlie’s investigation isn’t even limited to the things only about the life of Jesus, because Jesus says,

All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. (John 16:15)

Charlie’s job is to take all things that relate to God—God’s character, work, motives, nature, and everything else—and tell us about it in a reliable way.

It’s nice to have the testimony of someone we can trust on important matters like what God is like and the way we fit into God’s plan for the world. Have you noticed that these days we’re surrounded a lot of unreliable sources? In fact, it’s hard to find almost anyone we can believe, and trust that they’re telling us the truth.

We can’t be that sure of the news, because all the reporters have their own politics and point of view. We know that we can’t depend on the voices of advertisers, because they’re just trying to charm the money out of our pockets or the credit off our credit cards. We can’t even trust the solicitation letters and calls we get asking us to help others in good causes.

Truthfulness is an extremely rare commodity in the modern world, so if I know that Charlie can really be trusted, I know who I’m going to be listening to.

What were they waiting for?

On that day of Pentecost, the followers and disciples of Jesus were together in one place. He himself had told them,

I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:49)

They've followed his instructions, instructions that he gave just as he was withdrawing from them and going up into heaven. He'd promised, on their last night together before he died,

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. (John 14:18-19)

Death didn't hold him, and he did come back to them. But now, once again, they've been left alone. They know that he isn't dead. But now, even though they know he's alive, they can be pretty sure that he isn't going to be coming back to lead them.

They gather together, finding comfort in each other's company, wondering what will happen next. Can you picture them asking each other, "What on earth do you suppose he meant by being 'clothed with power from on high'?" Of course, the answer is that it'll be like nothing ever seen before on earth.

At the last supper together, he gave the disciples some clues about what was going to happen. He said to them,

I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. (John 16:7)

They didn't want some kind of mysterious spirit from behind door #3. They wanted Jesus to stay with them and be their teacher, just the way he'd been all through their travels.

Jesus said,

When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. (John 15:26)

What kind of Counselor do you think they were expecting? The Counselor is a spirit, so how can he also be someone to testify on behalf of Jesus? How is this supposed to work? Jesus also said,

the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:26)

The Counselor's going to be a teacher, their teacher in the place of Jesus, who's gone. The Counselor will continue the teaching that Jesus has been doing all along, and remind them all of the different things Jesus has taught them.

So the disciples did as they were told, waiting in the city for what was going to happen next. Luke tells us that

They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. (Acts 1:14)

Waiting is never easy. These followers of Jesus found about the best way I can think of to spend the time—keeping each other company and devoting themselves to prayer. Then, all of a sudden, their prayers were answered in the most unexpected way.

What happened when the Spirit came?

The day the Holy Spirit came was wonderful and dramatic. Put yourself there in the room with the disciples. The place was probably one of those upper story meeting rooms that they'd used to get together before. There may have been a rough table or two, some stools or chairs, and probably spaces to sit around on the floor.

They were truly feeling alone, since they'd seen Jesus going up into heaven in a cloud. They were waiting, just the way he'd asked them to wait. But even though he'd told them what was coming, they had no idea of what it was going to be like. They didn't even know whether they had hours and days or months and years left to wait.

And then suddenly there was a sound, like the roaring of a strong wind, filling the house. Notice that the scripture doesn't say that there was an actual wind, blowing through the house, but only a sound like the sound of a wind.

Living in a desert climate, they'd never have heard a waterfall like Niagara Falls, but if they'd heard it perhaps they would have said the sound was like that. We might have said there was a sound like an oncoming train, or an airplane taking off—whatever from our own experience was like that wild rushing sound.

In the midst of all the roaring noise, something appeared in the room. Divided tongues that looked like branching flames suddenly appeared. Luke says,

They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. (Acts 2:3).

Those who were there used the closest thing in their experience to describe what they saw. We don't know if what they saw was the color of fire, if it felt warm like fire, or even if it was bright like fire. All we know is that whatever appeared in the air had flickering branches like the tongues you'd see in a fire.

Then a tongue rested on each of them. The word for resting in the Greek is “καθίζω” (kathizō), and this isn't your gentle tap in the shoulder. This is a verb that means “to sit down on” with implications of settling in and staying right on top of whatever gets sat on.

The Spirit came in with a loud rushing sound, divided into parts that went towards each of them, and then sat down on them and filled them with the power of God. Then,

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:4)

Exhilaration bubbled over

Of course the disciples were joyful, overflowing with joy. For some, their joy could only find expression in words they'd never said before, in languages they'd never learned. I don't know about you, but there are times when, after a particularly powerful time of prayer, I just want to jump up and laugh and dance around.

Yes, I know that that would be disruptive, so I do try to hold it in. But I can imagine a tiny bit of how exuberant the disciples felt, receiving that touch of the Spirit in power. No wonder the neighbors thought they were drunk and partying even at that hour of morning.

At this point, the disciples' quiet prayer meeting has become a raucous party, way out of control. People passing in the street stop to listen, and the noise is hearable from blocks away. Luke tells us that

When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. (Acts 2:6)

Peter, noticing the growing crowd, and realizing that the disciples aren't making the best impression, knew he had to say something.

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! (Acts 2:14-15)

We may sound like we've been drinking from the strongest wine jug, but it's simply not so. We have a better reason for joy than you can all imagine, and we'd be happy to share our good fortune with you, too.

It's like the psalmist once said,

You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound. (Psalm 4:7)

The joy of the Lord is more powerful than anything that comes out of a bottle. The disciples are simply filled to overflowing, with the joy and power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit was the power and energy and strength behind the proclamation of the disciples. The thousands who joined them that first Pentecost were transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was the energy and strength behind the early church, carrying the word of God to the ears of strangers and into hearts all across the Roman world.