

EASTER MIRACLES: PART 4 - PENTECOST AND BEYOND

Luke 24:45-49; Acts 2:1-4; 2:17-21

Imagine the amount of life-altering change that took place in Jerusalem over the course of 50 days. The final Passover meal with Jesus led to his arrest, trial and sentencing; all leading to the Cross. For almost two days it all seemed to be over. When Jesus proclaimed “It is finished,” disciples and close followers understood those to be finite words. It was finished; it was over; what was left? The resurrection came and went with no one eagerly watching, waiting or anticipating the miraculous. It was the simple due diligence of fresh spices for the decaying body of Jesus that opened the door for a sliver of hope that the empty tomb might mean a resurrected Messiah. It took days and a supernatural appearance by Jesus for the disciples to grasp that Jesus had indeed taught his “life after death” reality. A few weeks of further prepping the disciples led to the Ascension of Jesus. They had to be thinking, “Here we go again He left us once before and He’s leaving us again.” This second absence would be different for all concerned. The disciples understood the need for him to go, to ascend, to close the salvation loop (descending and ascending to seal salvation for eternity), and they believed Him when he said, “One greater than I will come.” They believed, but could not have comprehended what that meant. “Greater than Jesus?” “Arrive how exactly, arrive when exactly?” Before leaving Jesus instructed his followers to remain in Jerusalem until the promised One arrives. This command came fraught with danger. It was not a safe place for those who continued to profess belief in Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, especially Israel’s *alive-again* Messiah. *Wait here and He will come.* They waited and God’s provision did arrive. Oh my, did God’s promised provision arrive!

“On the day Pentecost was being fulfilled, all the disciples were gathered in one place. Suddenly they heard the sound of a violent blast of wind rushing into the house from out of the heavenly realm. The roar of the wind was so overpowering it was all anyone could bear! *Then all at once a pillar of fire appeared before their eyes.* It separated into tongues of fire that engulfed each one of them. They were all filled and equipped with the Holy Spirit

and were inspired to speak in tongues empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak in languages they had never learned” (Acts 2: 1-4).

At that point there were only the disciples (now 12 strong again with the addition of Mathias) and a tiny group of Jesus-Messiah followers numbering 120. To properly set the stage God used this small number of holy people to reset His Kingdom’s work from that day forward. The Age of the Law was in process of giving way to the new Age of the Church, and midnight (figuratively speaking) came in with a bang. It’s also noteworthy that Jesus’ instructions to remain in Jerusalem and wait on the arrival of the One who is more powerful than Him could not have fully prepared the disciples for what they would see, hear, feel and experience on Pentecost Sunday.

Then he said, “Everything I told you while I was with you comes to this: All the things written about me in the law of Moses, in the prophets, and in the Psalms have to be fulfilled” (His ascension would close this loop and fulfill the Hebrew prophetic and predictive teachings). He went on to open their understanding of the Word of God, showing them how to read their Bibles this way. He said, “You can see now how it is written that the Messiah suffers, rises from the dead on the third day, and then a total life-change through the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in his name to all nations starting from here, from Jerusalem! You’re the first to hear and see it. You’re the witnesses. What comes next is very important: I am sending what me Father promised to you, so stay here in the city until he arrives, until you’re equipped with power from on high” (Luke 24:45-49).

The disciples did what Jesus commanded them to do, thus making themselves available for whatever God would do nine days later (nine days between the Ascension and Pentecost Sunday). Pentecost was a major Jewish celebration that fell a mere 50 days after Passover ended, so Jerusalem would be again crowded with visitors. When the Spirit arrived and entered the disciples they began to proclaim and witness to Jesus’s sacrifice, but in languages other than their own. Those who heard the commotion gathered to see what was happening. Responses ranged from shock to derision until Peter preached the most effective

short sermon of all time. The Spirit opened the hearts and minds of the assembled Jews (and a scattering of Gentiles) representing a long list of countries and regions and over 3000 people accepted Jesus as Messiah and Savior that day.

Concursus is a theological term depicting the ways in which the action of God and the subsequent action of human beings interact to accomplish a goal. Joshua Reichard has written extensively on this divine calculus and he cites a foundational question: *To what extent does God interact with humanity to accomplish His goals and to what extent can humanity realistically interact with God?* Personally, I believe the Mt. Sinai experience and Pentecost were prime examples of concursus. God chose to work with a relatively small group of people to reach the goal of bringing reconciliation and salvation to all people in all places. I also believe that we can only interact and assist God if we are empowered to do so. Left to our own devices we will fail miserably and disappoint God. Synced with the resources of God we can *move mountains* and do *disciple-stuff*.

Concursus #2 began with the onset of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday and it was a truly fantastic day. Let's break down the ingredients together.

Pentecost: The word *Pentecost* might conjure images of tongues of fire and mighty rushing wind-epiphanies, but it simply means fiftieth day. Originally Pentecost was an agriculture celebration of first fruits, called the Festival of Weeks. Later, less agriculturally based Jews shifted the celebration to one focused on the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. It is easy to miss the theological significance of the Passover to Easter – Easter to Pentecost path to the New Israel. It is no coincidence that these seminal events in God's relationship with His people sync to the degree they do. Think on this juxtaposition: "God appeared to Moses in thunder, fire and wind, so the phenomenon of God's glory also filled the apostles' room and shook all Jerusalem. As God had summoned the people around him at Mt. Sinai, so all Jerusalem flocked to the apostles' room to see what was going on" (Sproul, *TableTalk*). God's provisions to the newly liberated Israel at Mt. Sinai and *New Israel* on Pentecost Sunday could be described this way: God *gave* to Israel - God *gives* to the *New Israel*. God prepared Israel to be His nation of priests, His holy nation; God empowers His *New Israel* to take His

salvation-message to a *new level* in *new ways* by *new means* to *new places*. To call Pentecost a course-correction for God's plans for Creation is understatement, but that's exactly what it was. To make this work would necessitate a new type of power.

Power: Alfred Nobel discovered an explosive element stronger than anything the world had known at that time. He consulted a friend and Greek scholar for a name that best conveyed the meaning of explosive power. The Greek word suggested was *dunamis*, so Nobel named his invention *dynamite*. Pentecost ushered in the Age of Spiritual Power, the same word used for the Pentecost experience. The writer of Acts has Jesus citing *dunamis* when he told the disciples: "But you shall receive power (*dunamis*) when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you shall be my witnesses to Jerusalem, and to all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Note his saying *when* the Holy Spirit comes upon you not, *when you knuckleheads get your collective acts together!* The power Jesus spoke to was/is entirely supernatural. This is not power that can be achieved, purchased or inherited. This is burning bush on Mt. Sinai, raising Lazarus from the (seriously) dead, driving out demons with a single word and Divine Resurrection power. This is *dunamis* with a capital D, no, actually it's an all caps DUNAMIS. This power was bestowed upon the disciples and the other 120 followers of Jesus to equip them to carry forward all that Jesus began. This power created the Church of Jesus Christ. This power was/is so difficult to comprehend it is described simply as wind: "Mighty, rushing wind so powerful and focused it can be heard but not felt," and breath: "The Lord God formed the man from the soil of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). In the creation story God breathes life into his created beings and in the Pentecost narrative God breathes supernatural life into His people. This can be seen as a reset of God's progressive purposes through His created people. The Kingdom was going to be progressed; with Israel or the New Israel.

Purity: The Holy Spirit also came to provide purity to all who accept Jesus as Lord. A proper rendering of holy is separate or apart. Separate in the New Testament is not akin to isolation or distance; rather it is to be distinct due to character and

discernable lifestyle. Paul delineates a life powered by the Holy Spirit from a life dominated by base human desires and inclinations in his letter to the Galatians:

But I say, walk by the Spirit (God), and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh (selfish wants). For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

Effective witness, especially outside Jerusalem, would require living above and separate from the norm. Paul plainly states that the choice to live outside the Holy Spirit will result in every variety of sin, which we all well know, but my goodness his list is scary. Sexual immorality, idolatry, sorcery, hatred toward others, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies. No wonder even Paul said: *For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out (Romans 7:15).*

Paul nailed how the Pentecost arrival of the Holy Spirit was an eternal gamechanger. No one has the natural ability to consistently live above the fray, but living in and through the indwelling Holy Spirit provides the supernatural power to do so much better. The Passion Translation of Galatians 5 makes this easier to grasp: *Beloved ones, God has called us to live a life of freedom in the Holy Spirit. But don't view this wonderful freedom as an opportunity to set up a base of operations in the natural realm (5:13).*

The innate power to resist the pull of the natural realm "is" the Holy Spirit. *But when you are brought into the full freedom of the Spirit of grace, you will no longer be living under the domination of the law, but soaring above it!" (5:18).* When he lists the outcome/ result of soaring above the natural realm (joy, peace, patience, kindness, virtuous living, prevailing faith, and gentleness) it's clear the only way the New Israel could provide effective witness was to live into the power of the fresh Spirit.

Possession: The theology of prevenient grace teaches that before a person can pursue God, God must first pursue the person. Pentecost has prevenient grace written all over it; it's first century spiritual graffiti. Pentecost also provides for a

course correction as the age of the law is giving way to the new age of salvation by grace. God the Father is providing God the Spirit to formalize a renewed covenantal relationship based on the sacrifice of God the Son. This shift involves the complete Trinity, which signals how important God's hopes for living in reconciled relationship with His creation is. God has been pursuing His creation from the moment of creation. Pentecost jump started that reality when a supernaturally empowered Peter preached the most effective sermon of all time. God is possessive, but in a healthy way. He wants to "mark" us as His own, which he does through the Holy Spirit.

Prophecy: Freshly filled with the Holy Spirit Peter proclaims Jesus as the path to salvation and to "right" living. Thousands of Jews (and Gentiles) from all over the globe were present in Jerusalem that Sunday. The number of spoken languages was immense, but Peter's message was miraculously understood by all. Let's tackle the prophecy facet of Pentecost by questions and answers:

1. **What is prophecy?** Prophecy is not "future-telling," as in having the gift of predicting the future. Prophecy is truth-telling. It is the same thing the Hebrew prophets practiced. Prophecy can involve a future element, but that too would be message provided by God or the Holy Spirit. Matt Skinner adds: "Prophecy is naming the places and ways where God intervenes or initiates in the world. It is a component of proclaiming the word of God and identifying God's salvation at work." Prophets take a specific assignment from God and communicate those truths to people whom God has selected to hear. In this case Peter was responding to a question: "What does this mean?"
2. **What did the people hear?** The short answer is, "everything Peter and the others said, but in their own unique languages." If the list of nations is accurate the number of unique people groups would number a minimum of 15, with an undiscernible number of total dialects and sub-dialects. This list represents the known world of that day. It's hard to determine if the list is literal, symbolic, or somewhere in the middle. We do know that the Medes had been extinct for over 500 years by the time of Jesus, but the point is that

the “world” was represented on Pentecost Sunday in Jerusalem. The miracle is that these various people groups heard the Gospel story of Messiah-Jesus in their own language.

God speaks...And the people understand...This confuses them. (David Roberts)

- 3. Does Pentecost serve as a reversal of the Tower of Babel?** Genesis 11:4: The builders of the Tower of Babel said, “Let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves.” It is believed there are many possible reasons for this ambitious and very short-sided building project. Building a tower that reaches to the heavens is an attempt to reach God where he dwells. It is an attempt to equalize the status between God and humankind. That is the harshest rationale. Another is simply the wish to make a name for themselves and to be significant rather than insignificant. By successfully erecting a tower that reaches the dwelling of God would bring them eternal honor, respect and appreciation.

This is relatable. Who wants to be but one grain of sand on a vast seashore when the possibility of being a unique snowflake is within reach? They also feared being scattered across the globe. They preferred the unity of their own enforced isolation. It should be noted that whatever their reason, we are still talking about these people thousands of years later; but infamy is not the same as famous. God did not see their attempts as being positive, so he scrambled their one common language into multiple languages. This led to the very thing they feared. They scattered.

At Pentecost God took a scattered world that spoke multiple languages and brought them together under the common banner of Jesus. God is restoring all people. God is creating the New Israel from Jews and Arabs and Egyptians and Libyans and Elamites and Turks and on and on. In the Tower of Babel story humans attempt to go “up” to reach God; at Pentecost God comes

“down” to His Creation (which is the story of Jesus as well). Pentecost also provides the ultimate avenue to feeling significant.

4. **How does the prophecy of Joel factor into the Pentecost narrative?** Peter steps up to deliver the first sermon of the New Age. He first deals with the accusation that the followers of Jesus were drunk and as such were uttering gibberish. He then speaks to Jesus being the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel:

This is what I will do in the last days. I will pour out my Spirit on everybody and cause your sons and daughters to prophesy, and your young men will see visions, and your old men will experience dreams from God. The Holy Spirit will come upon all my servants, men and women alike, and they will prophesy. I will reveal startling signs and wonders in the sky above and mighty miracles on the earth below. Blood and fire and pillars of clouds will appear. For the sun will be turned dark and the moon blood-red before that great and awesome appearance of the day of the Lord. But everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved (Acts 2: 17-21, from Joel 2:28-32).

Next he focused on the reality of Jesus as both Messiah and Lord (the true fulfillment of Israel’s prophesized hope from the line of David and Divine).

5. **What happened at the conclusion of the sermon?** The Spirit moved among the people and they saw Jesus for who he was and what he had accomplished on the cross, and they became aware of their sinfulness and need for reconciliation with God. They are spiritually stirred and ask Peter how they should respond. “Peter instructs the audience to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus. Repentance denotes a change of both mind and action. Baptism is an outwardly demonstrated allegiance to Jesus. The twofold result of repentance and initiation into the restored people of God is forgiveness of sins and receipt of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word for forgiveness is *aphesis*, literally meaning release” (J. Bradley Chance).

The standout miracle of the Easter to Pentecost narrative? Possibly the sudden impact of the fully manifested Holy Spirit; or, all present hearing the Jesus story in his/her own language; or, Peter's comeback from denying Jesus three times; or, 3000 people accepting Jesus as Messiah-Savior-Lord; or, *fill in the blank*.

So what's our takeaway, what's the standout miracle of the Easter to Pentecost narrative? I have two to share, one positive, one not-as-positive. Let's go with the not-as-positive first: The gift of the Spirit did not make life easier for the followers of Jesus, it became more difficult. Few lives became easier. Following Jesus and being powered by the Spirit is not a life of wine and roses or lollipops and ice cream; it is a complicated and often uncomfortable existence. David Lose explains:

Absent the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples could go back to their profession of fishermen. I can hear James and John explaining, "Sure, it was a wild and crazy three-year-ride, and that Jesus was a heck of a guy, but maybe we needed to get that out of our system before we could settle down and take on the family business."

Once the Spirit comes, however, any return to normalcy is no longer an option. And this is O.K., it is the life we were born for and we should theologically embrace it, even if it complicates our lives. We must remember that the high road is also the long road (no short-cuts) and at times the long road also becomes the lonely long road... but it's our road.

New York Times columnist David Brooks challenged a university class to eschew the American obsession with self-fulfillment and instead find themselves in service to others by making and keeping what he calls sacred commitments and by rising to the challenges they discover all around and outside of them:

"Most successful young people," he writes, "don't look inside and then plan a life. They look outside and find a problem, which summons their life..."

Most people don't form a plan and then lead a life. They are called by a problem, and the self is constructed gradually by their calling."

But, we do not seek this life, it seeks us, God offers it to us, all we have to do is accept it.

The second miracle of the Easter to Pentecost experience is the idea of "release." The Greek word for forgiveness can be defined as release. Post Pentecost, a person can gain forgiveness of sin by acceptance and repentance. This isn't temporary release from the penalty of sin; it's as eternal as the Spirit itself. Plus, and this is a big plus, we are also released into the world to share our Jesus story. Pentecost allowed for the whole Holy Nation, Nation of Priests-thing to find new life, and that new life is *us*.

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