

The promise of the Father

Acts 2

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Have you ever wondered what all those people were doing in Jerusalem, as described by Luke in the second chapter of the book of Acts? Celebrating Pentecost, the text says. Yes, but what is Pentecost? It is the 50th day after another special day, Easter. That is correct, but can it then be that all those people from **“every nation under heaven”** were celebrating a day directly related to the resurrection of Jesus? How can that be, since the vast majority of them were Jews who, if given half a chance, would have perhaps also cried out, **“Crucify him! Crucify Him!”**?

What were they celebrating then? The answer is found in the Old Testament, across the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, though in Leviticus 23 we read the description of all 7 annual Feasts the Lord gave his people, the people of Israel.

This raises another question: What were these Feasts for? At a natural level each of the Feasts celebrated some aspect of Jewish history. They were designed to remind the people of Israel the mighty works God had done for them in the exodus out of Egypt: during their desert wanderings and eventually taking them into the Promised Land. So these Feasts had a **historical dimension**. And remembering the past would lead to grateful and thankful hearts, full of praise to their God, so constantly enriching their relationship with God their Savior, serving Him with **“sincerity and faithfulness”** (Joshua. 24:14). So we see that these Feasts also had a **spiritual significance**, designed to teach and remind them of the reality of sin, judgment, forgiveness and sanctification. These Feasts would remind God’s people of the importance of trusting God and of making Him the priority in their lives. But these Feasts also had a **prophetic dimension**, in that they anticipated a greater fulfillment of the symbolism of the Feasts. It is not surprising that each of the major feasts are in some way alluded to in the New Testament, because these Feasts foreshadowed future events; some have been fulfilled and others are yet to be fulfilled. These Feasts are the "shadow of things to come", of which Christ is the "body" or substance. This is what the Apostle Paul writes to the church at Colossae: **“Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ”** (Col. 2:16-17).

Christ himself had said so on one of the occasions He had gone up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish feasts: **“If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me”** (John 5:46).

All these people from **“every nation under heaven”** were celebrating one of these 7 Jewish annual feasts, the Feast of **Pentecost**, only that it wasn’t called Pentecost (the Greek name), it was called **Feast of Harvest** –or **Feast of Weeks**, because it came 49 weeks and one day after the 3rd of the big annual feasts, called **Feast of First Fruits** (Easter to us). So there is a relationship between the Feast of Harvest and the Feast of First Fruits. What is it?

The Old Testament tells us the people of Israel started to celebrate the **Feast of First Fruits** once they had entered the Promised Land (that’s the historical context). What did they celebrate? Well, God had instructed them that, right at the beginning of the barley harvest, they would take a sheaf of the first fruits of the harvest and offer it to the Lord. It was an act of gratitude and of recognition that everything they had and enjoyed came from God, reminding them He should be the first priority in their lives (this was the spiritual dimension of the Feast). But there was a prophetic dimension too, because the sheaf of the first fruits was a symbol of a future and glorious event: following Christ’s death at Passover, the next great event was his resurrection. The **Feast of First Fruits (Easter)** speaks of the resurrection of Jesus, who had died at Passover, AND in the same way that the first fruits of their barley harvest were a guarantee of the full harvest that would follow a little later –celebrated at the **Feast of Harvest (Pentecost)**– so the resurrection of Christ is the guarantee of a glorious future harvest. Paul writes to the church in Corinth:

“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.” (1 Corinthians 15:20-23)

This then is the context of Acts chapter 2: Fifty days after the Feast of First Fruits (Easter to us) the people in Jerusalem are celebrating the **Feast of Harvest (Pentecost to us)**, when the extraordinary events described in the first 4 verses of this chapter take place. For ten days after the Lord had **“left his disciples and was carried up into heaven”** (Luke 24:51), they had been waiting for something to happen. The wait was necessary because the promised Holy Spirit had to come exactly 50 days after the Messiah’s resurrection, on the Feast of First Fruits (Easter to us).

It is not at all surprising that these most extraordinary events prompted a reaction from the devout Jews from **“every nation under heaven”**. Some reacted with amazement and bewilderment as they heard in their own tongues **“the mighty works of God”** (2:11), and they wished in all honesty to know what it all meant! But, others belittled what they saw and heard by assuming the disciples were drunk! It is at this point that Peter, led by the Holy Spirit, begins one of the most powerful and instructive discourses of the Bible.

He begins by pointing out that wine is not what’s caused them to speak intelligible and known languages, rather it is the fulfilment of God’s promise, spoken by the prophet Joel centuries earlier: **“And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh”**, announces Peter in the 17th verse of this chapter. Then he proceeds to inform them that: **“Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know, this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up”** (Acts 2:22-23).

One wonders whether at this point the parable of the man who planted a vineyard, let it out to tenants, and went into another country began to creep back into their heads. The tenants beat up and killed many of the owner's servants sent to collect the fruit of the vineyard. Finally the owner sent his son, thinking the tenants would respect his son, but **"they took him, killed him and cast him out of the vineyard"** (Mark 12:8). And Mark goes on to point out that the Jews that heard Jesus' parable **"tried to arrest him, for they perceived that he had told the parable against them"** (Mark 12:12). These devout Jewish men must have been feeling very uncomfortable at this stage!!

They had killed **"Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God"**, says Peter, **"But God raised him up"**, and he goes on to explain King David's prophetic Psalm 16, where David **"foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption"** (Acts 2:31). And then, please pay attention to what Peter goes on to say: **"This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing"** (Acts 2:32-33).

Yes, the disciples were amongst the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection and of his rise into Heaven, but Peter now tells these devout Jewish men that they are now witnesses too, for they are seeing and hearing the pouring of the Holy Spirit after Jesus had **"been exalted at the right hand of God"**. These people can see and hear the evidence that the man they had killed and thrown out of his vineyard is the one responsible for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and is therefore none other than God incarnate!

So Peter is stating here that one of the fundamental purposes of the coming of the Holy Spirit was to witness to the Lord Jesus, as Jesus had previously told his disciples: **"But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me"** (John 15:26).

A few weeks back, at the Feast of Passover, Jesus of Nazareth ("The Lamb of God") had been publicly and shamefully put to death by wicked men. Now men from **"every nation under heaven"**, and the whole universe too, could see that the man who had lived amongst them for a brief span of time was none other than God incarnate, their very Creator, now sitting at the right hand of God the Father! **"Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified"** (Acts 2:36).

Peter's discourse, which flowed directly from the Holy Spirit, had tremendous impact on his audience. As the enormity of their crime became evident to them, they were **"cut to the heart"** (2:37), and conscious of their utter moral bankruptcy cried out in anguish to Peter and the rest of the disciples: **"Brothers, what shall we do?"** (Acts 2:37). We find Peter's reply to those he has previously accused of murder, in the following verses: **"And Peter said to them, '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. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself'"** (Acts 2:38-39). They were being offered mercy, the forgiveness of their sins! That may have been enough for them, as it had been for the prodigal son who, realizing his sin (he couldn't wait for his father's death –wished him dead) and having repented, simply wanted to be taken back as a servant. He was quite happy with that prospect, and perhaps Peter's audience would have been more than happy with that too.

But God was offering those who had been instrumental in the murder of the **“Author of Life”** (Act 3:15) more than just forgiveness. God was offering them His Spirit, the gift of new life. He was offering them the very life they had tried to snuff out. God was offering them a new and intimate and personal and direct relationship with Him. Where can you find in the whole universe an act of such unfathomable and underserved mercy?

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This defies all human understanding, doesn’t it? Of course it does! Listen to what the prophet Isaiah, guided by the same Holy Spirit, had written centuries earlier: **“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”** (Isaiah 55:8-9).

God was offering them more than just forgiveness. They had killed the **“Author of Life”** (Peter in Acts 3:15) but they were also being offered nothing less than to become sons and daughters of the Living God. As Peter would later write in his second epistle (2 Peter 1:4), they were being invited to become **“partakers of the divine nature”**. And this is where our human instinct kicks in: “Well, they certainly didn’t deserve any of that: neither forgiveness nor new life!” Very true! But nor do any of us, by the way! You see, we once stood on the same ground these devout men and the gathering crowd had stood on: **“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior”** (Col. 1:21).

But we praise and thank God for extending to us the same unparalleled and unmerited mercy: **“But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation”** (Col. 1:22). **“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus”** (Ephesians 2:4-6).

So far we have noted that the Holy Spirit came **a)** to witness to mankind and the whole universe the fact of Jesus is Lord and Christ and, at personal level, **b)** to live in the hearts of every one that believes and repents. How extraordinary is that!

Now, a word of caution here! Verses 28 & 39, taken by themselves, can lead to some confusion, because of the order of the events they describe. Our brothers and sisters, who will be baptized in a few minutes, have already repented, have already received forgiveness of their sins, AND at that very moment they received the gift of the Holy Spirit, now living in them.

That is the order, for Salvation stands solely and firmly on the ground of Faith, it is not secured by any type of baptism or by any other means: **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast”** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

What they will do in a short while, obeying the Lord in baptism, gives witness to the fact that they had already passed from death to life, dead to sin and self, and alive in Christ. What Peter is saying to the crowd in these two verses is that their repentance must be shown to be genuine. As mentioned earlier, many in the crowd would have some weeks earlier at the Feast of Passover shouted publicly and energetically at Pontius Pilate for the murder of Jesus. So, if their repentance was genuine, they must now show it by being publically baptized in the name of Jesus, now their Saviour. They were to do it in full view of the murderers they had previously associated with, and of course, be prepared for a tremendous backlash. If they now sided with Jesus, it would be an irrefutable sign that they had repented.

And then Luke goes on to record what happened: ***“So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls”*** (Acts 2:41).

Some years later Paul would describe what had happened to them and to every believer: ***“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross”*** (Colossians 2:13-14).

Peter had rightly accused them of the nailing of Jesus to the cross, but having ***“received the word”*** and having repented, God had forgiven their sins. They had nailed Jesus, the Author of Life, to the cross –thinking it would be the end of Him!–, but God takes the legal document listing the charges against them and “nails it to the cross” –cancelled forever!– and makes them ***“alive in Christ”***. Let’s rejoice in the riches of God’s grace and mercy, for that is our experience too!

Can you imagine the indescribable joy these devout men and women experienced? They had come to Jerusalem to celebrate with joy and devotion the Feast of Harvest (Pentecost as we know it) a ***“shadow of the things that were to come”*** (Colossians 2:17). But they would leave Jerusalem having experienced the reality this shadow pointed to, they had found Christ! They had found peace with God and become ***“partakers of the divine nature”***!

One wonders, though, how long it took our ***“adversary the devil”*** (1 Peter 5:8) to begin his attack on these young believers. They had publicly switched sides, so one can imagine the opposition they would face from family and friends, let alone from others. They would face sorrow and fear –that, after all, had been the reaction of the Lord’s disciples when he told them He was leaving them (John 16:6), especially since the Lord had told them they would be persecuted and thrown out of the synagogues (John 16:1-4). So imagine how these new believers felt as the enemy of our souls set to work. BUT as ***“they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers”*** (Acts 2:42), they would be taught that the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit they had received, was the COMFORTER (John 14:16 & 26), “one who is called to the aid of another” is the meaning of the Greek word. They would learn that the third person of the Trinity dwelling in them would be their Strength in all weakness, their Peace in all trouble, their Wisdom in all darkness, their Guide in every perplexity, their Comforter and Companion in all sadness and discouragement.

I don’t know what you are going through at this point of your Christian pilgrimage, through life’s joys and trials, life’s satisfactions and disappointments. I don’t know the extent of your doubts or whether you are questioning God’s sovereignty in your life (I think we have all been there at some

point in our lives). You may be facing persecution (however crude or subtle), facing difficulties of all shapes and sizes, facing discouragement due to health issues. You have been told by your employer that you are surplus to the company's needs, as if you were simply a lump of raw material (some of us have been there too), and your dignity and self-worth has taken a knocking. At some point in life, sorrow and fear rear their ugly heads!

We can empathize with some of our brothers and sisters inasmuch as we have experienced some of these situations too, but more importantly, we are called to go beyond empathy and **"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ"** (Galatians 6:2). The apostle Paul had earlier quoted Jesus in saying that the entire law is fulfilled in one word: Love (Galatians 5:14). Love is the law of Christ.

We must recognize, though, that we can fail each other, so let's, above all else, hold firm to the unshakable truths and firm promises we have been reminded of today: We have the Comforter by our side forever! He will not fail us!

As the new believers, 3,000 that day, faced the beginning of their earthly pilgrimage they would know that they would not travel alone. The Comforter would be with them forever (John 14:16) and through the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, in the midst of life's joys and trials, life's disappointments and satisfactions, they would be sanctified through the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts until, as the Feast of Harvest (Pentecost) had foretold, they would rise to **"be with the Lord forever"** (1 Thessalonians 4: 16-17).

So, as we walk through life, however far we have gone in terms of years or spiritual progress, may we also find much comfort, encouragement and joy in these wonderful promises.