

Good News for Every People, Language and Nation

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[0 : 00] I'd like us this morning to turn back to the passage that we read a few minutes ago, to Acts chapter 2.

! There's about 120 in Jerusalem and perhaps a few hundred more in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. Today, the number of disciples of Jesus Christ is a vast, uncountable number of people all across the globe.

And worship today is going on in more languages than we could count. How did it get from that situation, just the most a few hundred in Palestine 2,000 years ago, to this vast number today? Well, the answer is that it has a lot to do with what happened on the day of Pentecost. Now, Pentecost is a unique event, just as Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension into heaven are unique events in God's plan and purpose in world history.

[1 : 39] And Pentecost is also very closely bound together with Jesus' ascension into heaven. Peter talks about that in verse 33 of Acts chapter 2, which we didn't read, but there he's really explaining what is happening.

And he says that Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of God, and from there he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.

So Jesus has been exalted, and from that place he has poured out the Holy Spirit. Also in John chapter 16, that's Jesus' message to his disciples the evening before his suffering, his crucifixion. And there he says to them, Unless I go away, the counselor, and the counselor is a name for the Holy Spirit, the counselor will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.

So at the beginning of Acts chapter 2, we read that when the day of Pentecost came, they, that's all the disciples, were all together in one place.

[2 : 55] And the place was probably the temple. That would be the only place big enough to house the number of people that's spoken about in this chapter. And we read of four things happening.

The first is wind. The second is fire. The third is the spirit. And the fourth is languages. So first of all, wind.

In verse 2, we read that suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

The words in both Hebrew and Greek, the two main biblical languages, the words for spirit, is the same as the word for wind or breath.

So the word for spirit can mean spirit, wind, or breath. Jesus, earlier on in John chapter 3, when speaking to Nicodemus, had likened the spirit, the Holy Spirit, to the wind.

[3 : 59] You can't see the wind, but you know it by its effects. We see that frequently when we see windmills. You can't see the wind, but you see the blades going round. And, of course, we see the effect of it when we turn on the lights and the fridges going and the oven and everything else that relies on electricity.

We don't see the wind, but we know it by its effects. And this sound of the wind symbolizes and comes along with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And it's not a gentle breeze. It's a violent wind that blows from heaven. And the promise of the Holy Spirit is closely connected with power.

Jesus, at the end of Luke, tells the disciples, I'm going to send you what my Father has promised. But stay in the city of Jerusalem until you have been clothed with power from on high.

And at the beginning of Acts, Jesus says to them, again to the disciples, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. Now, the Holy Spirit of God has been active since the beginning of creation.

[5 : 22] We read that throughout the Old Testament. Right at the beginning, the Holy Spirit is there at creation, hovering or brooding over the surface of the waters.

And throughout the Old Testament, when we read of prophets and leaders being sent, so often we read of God's Spirit enabling and empowering them. But now, at Pentecost, the Spirit comes with a new and unprecedented power.

And it's not just on a few select individuals who are special, but on all of God's people. That's what Peter says, quoting from Joel's prophecy, that in the last days, God will pour out His Spirit on all the people.

And that is what is happening here at Pentecost. So that's the first thing, wind. The second is fire. In verse 3, they saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.

I mentioned just briefly, when we were introducing the reading, that Pentecost came to be viewed and celebrated as the annual celebration of the giving of the law to the Israelites, to Moses at Sinai.

[6 : 52] And when that took place, we read in Exodus chapter 19 that Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire.

And here, again, we have the Lord descending, not on the mountain, but on His people in fire. The Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is God, is the Lord, is Yahweh, and He descends on the disciples in fire. This is an appearance of God. Also, John the Baptist had said to people, he said that he was not the Messiah, but he says, I baptize you with water.

This is in Luke 3. I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And so, what John had predicted is now taking place.

[8 : 02] The third thing that happens is that they were all filled with the Holy Spirit in verse 4. Now, there's different terms that are used here.

In this verse, it's that they were all filled, or filled up with the Spirit. John the Baptist had spoken of Jesus, the one coming after him, baptizing people with the Holy Spirit.

And Peter, when he quotes from Joel's prophecy a bit later on, he speaks of the Spirit being poured out. So, these are all different terms for the same thing happening.

The Spirit, they're filled with the Spirit, they're baptized with the Spirit, the Spirit is poured out on the disciples. Now, the terminology of being filled with the Spirit is also used later on, particularly when the disciples have to speak up about their faith in Christ, what they have witnessed in the events of Jesus' death and resurrection.

But these other terms of being baptized with the Spirit, the Spirit being poured out, are only used of this one-off experience. And we see here that they're all filled with the Holy Spirit.

[9 : 21] It's not that some are filled and not others. All of them, all the disciples, are filled with the Holy Spirit. Now, you might wonder, how does that relate to us today? Well, all those who believe in Christ, all believers in Christ, receive the Spirit, they're filled with the Spirit, when they come to faith, when we come to faith.

At the end of this sort of event on Pentecost, in verse 38, Peter says to the crowd that gathered there, repent, and each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus the Messiah, so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So basically, all who repent of their sins, all who come to faith in Jesus Christ, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes to the church in Corinth and says that, we were all baptized with one Spirit, so as to form one body, whether Jews, Gentiles, slave or free, and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Abraham Kuyper, who was a Dutch theologian, around the turn of the 20th century, used an illustration, which I guess was really apt for his own time, because places were coming onto, you know, electricity was being spread, and places were coming onto the grid, and he used the illustration of a whole city being put on the grid, the electricity grid, so power is given to the whole city, so that's like Pentecost.

But then, in sort of subsequent days, weeks, months, outlying villages, and even individual houses are linked up to the electricity grid, and that is like what happens when we today come to faith.

[11 : 13] If you as an individual, when you put your trust in Jesus Christ, it's like you're linked up to the grid. You receive the power of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit works in your life, you are filled

with the Spirit, when you come to faith in Jesus Christ.

And then the fourth thing that happens is languages. In verse four, that they began to speak in other tongues or languages as the Spirit enabled them.

So this is a miracle of speaking. It's not a miracle of hearing, it's a miracle of speaking. They actually spoke in many different languages. It was a sudden, miraculous ability to speak in languages that they had never previously learned.

These are human languages, languages spoken by different ethnic groups, and it's the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, that enables them to do this.

Now, the following verses sort of explain this a bit more. In verse five, it says that there were staying in Jerusalem, God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

[12:25] And they were there for the festival, the Feast of Pentecost. Many Jews who were sort of scattered around the world would retire to Jerusalem to live out the rest of their days there in the Holy City.

And also, people went on pilgrimage. People went as pilgrimage, particularly at festival time, to Jerusalem. And in verse six, we read that when they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.

So these people who had come to Jerusalem, they would speak the language of the place they had grown up in. Probably many of them didn't have much Aramaic, which was the local language in Jerusalem.

Then in verse seven, we read that utterly amazed, they asked, aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our own native language?

Galilee was not known as a place of learning. It had a reputation for kind of being out in the sticks, being a rural backwater.

[13:43] There was no way that these Galileans, of all people, could know all these different languages, some of which came from very far away. In fact, we've got a slide with a map.

Can we have the next slide? Yeah, I don't know how clearly you can see that, but it's got the names of the different places just scattered around the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

So, and Luke lists them in verse nine. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, parts of Libya near Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs.

We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own languages. Now, for those of us, probably the majority here, whose first language is English, it's probably hard for us just to imagine how amazing this was because almost everywhere you can go in the world, you will find some people at least who will know at least a bit of English.

But imagine a Gaelic speaker traveling to Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea. And there they encounter a rural North Korean peasant farmer getting up in the public square and addressing them in perfect Gaelic.

[15:22] And there you get a bit closer to what's happening here. But it's not just one language, it's in loads of different languages that people hear, the apostles, the disciples, speaking to them the wonders of God in those languages.

So, Peter goes on to relate these events to Joel's prophecy of the last days when God would pour out his spirit on all people.

But there's another Old Testament passage which is not referenced explicitly, but I think is in the background here. And I think Luke hints at it. That's Genesis chapters 10 and 11.

The list of different nations in verses 9 to 11. Maybe Luke is kind of echoing the list of nations that is given in Genesis chapter 10.

After the flood at the time of Noah, it just recounts how different nations emerged from Noah's descendants and spread out across the globe.

[16:33] And then in Genesis chapter 11, we read of the Tower of Babel. Let me just read that to you. This is Genesis 11 from verse 1.

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.

They used brick instead of stone and bitumen for mortar. And they said, come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens so that we may make a name for

ourselves.

Otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth. But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, if as one people speaking the same language, they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not be, so they will not understand each other. So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth and they stopped building the city.

[17 : 45] That is why it was called Babel because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there, the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

So at Babel, there was a communication breakdown in judgment on the arrogant plans of that society. Pentecost is a communication breakthrough.

Immediately following that account of Babel in Genesis 11, we have another genealogy. And from all those different nations, God selects one man, Abram, out of them all.

And God promises that through Abram, all the families of the earth would be blessed. That's in Genesis 12, verse 3. That all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

And now, at Pentecost, God had begun to fulfill that promise through the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus into heaven. Through those events, salvation for the world is achieved, is realized.

[19 : 03] And now, God sends the Holy Spirit to give power to the disciples to witness about Jesus to the ends of the earth in fulfillment of that promise to Abram that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him, through his offspring.

And the sign that God gives, along with the sending of the Holy Spirit, is that now God is breaking through those barriers set up at Babel in judgment on the godless pride and arrogance of that society.

God's word, his message, the good news of Jesus Christ is not just for one people or nation or language, but for all. Now, all the people there at Pentecost were Jews, either by birth or by conversion to Judaism.

The gospel impacting non-Jewish nations comes later in Acts. But this event anticipates and signposts the good news of Jesus Christ going to every nation and tribe and especially language because the good news of Jesus Christ is for everyone.

now, in the past, I myself have preached on Pentecost being a reversal of Babel. But that's not quite right.

[20 : 32] If it were, the apostles would have maybe declared the praises of God in their own language, in Aramaic, and everyone would have miraculously understood them. But that's not what happens here.

Instead, the Spirit enables the disciples to speak in the numerous languages that were understood and represented there in Jerusalem at the feast. God does not abolish the different languages.

Rather, He communicates in those languages. And that's really important for us today. There are many different religious traditions that claim that one particular language is the sacred language, the holy language.

It might be Arabic or Sanskrit or Pali or Latin or Syriac or some other language that people say that is the language that God speaks. That's the sacred language, the holy language.

But according to the Bible, there is no one language that God communicates in. God speaks in every language. language. Just think about that for a minute.

[21 : 43] This service today is in English, the English language. And for most of us here, that's our mother tongue. We hear the word of God read and preached in English.

And we respond in praise to God in singing and praying in English, a language that didn't exist at the time of Pentecost and whose roots lie in languages spoken at the furthest corners of the earth from the perspective of Jerusalem.

But the fact that we don't even think about that most of the time is really significant. It's just so normal, so natural to us because the gospel has made itself at home in the English language.

And that's, of course, just as true for those of you who speak in other languages, the other languages some of which we read from earlier. And the fact that we don't even think about this most of the time is really significant.

It's the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit of mission. That work that was begun here on the day of Pentecost and is manifested by this miracle of languages. [23 : 12] And we should give thanks for that, give thanks that we can approach God in our own language, in our own mother tongue. It also tells us that the work of Bible translation is so important and so in tune with what is happening here, the work of the Spirit at Pentecost, so that everyone may read and hear the Word of God in their own language, in their own mother tongue.

And hear the voice of God in their own language. 500 years ago this month, the New Testament was first published in modern English.

William Tyndale, the man who translated it, labored hard on that task and he had, he suffered exile, he was exiled and in the end suffered martyrdom for his efforts.

And yet what he achieved had just enormous effect on the English speaking world. And indeed that influence is still here today. Even in modern translations his influence is there and indeed in English language he has left his mark.

And we should give thanks for that, that God used him to translate the Bible into our own language. And of course it's not just English, it's in countless other languages too.

[24 : 36] Just last October I was at a conference in Pakistan and I met a man there, he wasn't a Christian, he was a Shia Muslim cleric from the far north of Pakistan, a place called Baltistan.

The language there is Balty. And he said, oh I've got a friend who's been involved in translating the gospel into my language, into Balti.

And he tried to get him on the phone to speak to me but that call failed. But it's just amazing just to hear of that. They're in northern Pakistan in this language receiving the New Testament in their own language.

And of course that's repeated again and again all across the globe. hope. I've been in prayer meetings where people have just been told, you know, pray in your own language.

And there's been people from speaking Persian, Dari, Sarani, and other languages praying in those languages in that meeting, praying in their own mother tongue. And I think Pentecost tells us that Christian mission that is in step with the Holy Spirit is in no way imperialistic.

[25 : 53] That true biblical faith is not an imperialistic faith. It doesn't seek to impose on listeners, on new people, a language and a culture from outside.

But the gospel makes itself at home in every language and culture that it goes to. Now, sadly, sometimes the church has not been or was in step with the Holy Spirit in that.

It has imposed an outside language and culture. But the work of the Holy Spirit is to communicate in every language, in every culture on earth.

God is also a God who creates and loves, and God is to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

Christ. But God is also a God who creates and loves diversity. Every snowflake is unique.

[27 : 07] Every acorn is unique. Every set of fingerprints is unique. And in the renewal of all things, in the new creation, we will see that diversity.

In the redeemed human race, we will see not the abolition of diverse cultures and languages, but they're bringing together in their renewal and redemption in Jesus Christ.

That is why one of the final visions we have in the New Testament is in the book of Revelation 7 verse 9, where John the seer writes, After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne, and before the Lamb.

Amen. May God bless his word to us.