

The Birthday of Christianity

Acts 2: 1-12

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Waiting is hard, especially when you don't know when the expected arrival of what you desire will actually show up. Years ago, when I was a little boy, Aunt Helen, who lived in Philadelphia, said that she was sending me a special Christmas present. It would arrive by mail. Each day I waited anxiously for the arrival of what had been promised, hoping that the mailman would show up at the front door with the longed for and eagerly anticipated gift. Perhaps some of those same kind of feelings took hold of the followers of Jesus as they awaited the promise of the Holy Spirit after His ascension into heaven. He had told them on numerous occasions to wait in Jerusalem for the gift that His heavenly Father would bestow upon them. He told them that even as John had baptized with water, they would be baptized, immersed in the Holy Spirit. Now ten days after Jesus had departed into heaven that promise was about to be fulfilled.

It was the day of Pentecost, one of the three special holidays celebrated by the Jewish people. It was called "Pentecost" because it took place literally fifty days after Passover, the celebration of the Jewish people's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Like Passover, this was a pilgrimage celebration. Jewish people came from all over the Roman world to the city of Jerusalem. The holiday marked the beginning of the harvesting of barley, so it was an agricultural celebration. But it was more than that. It also celebrated the giving of the Law when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments. God chose this holiday which marked the beginning of the harvesting season to inaugurate the beginning of the harvesting of those who would become the followers of Christ. Like the birth of a child, it marked the birth of a brand-new religion. It was the birthday of Christianity. Described in chapter two of the book of Acts, the events which transpired on that day can best be described by four words—prayer, presence, power, and proclamation. Let's take a look at each of them.

During the ten days between Christ's ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, what were the followers of Christ doing? They were waiting. But their waiting was not a time of anxious impatience. They were "praying." In the first chapter of the book of Acts, verses 13-14, we are told that after Jesus' departure, His followers returned to the Upper Room in Jerusalem. The apostles, along with the women who had accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem, including Mary, His mother, and His brothers, were constantly engaged in prayer. They knew that prayer was

the most important thing they could do while they waited. Speaking about prayer, Jesus had said during His Sermon on the Mount, "Keep on asking and it will be given to you; keep on seeking and you will find; keep on knocking and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). Persistence in prayer was and is the key to answered prayers.

Two elderly women, one blind and the other crippled, discovered the truth of that verse of Scripture. They lived on an island in northern Scotland. They were real prayer warriors. They continually prayed for an outpouring of God's Spirit on their island community and that prayer was answered in a powerful way. A Spirit filled revival transformed their church and then swept throughout the northern regions of Scotland shortly after World War II. It was the fulfillment of what Jesus had said, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him" (Luke 11:13). The followers of Jesus prayed continually and they prayed earnestly. On the day of Pentecost their prayers were answered.

That brings us to the second word, "presence." The presence of the Holy Spirit swept through the place where they were staying like a mighty wind. Each of them, about 120 in number, were anointed with tongues of fire as they were baptized in the Holy Spirit. Wind and fire have always been associated with the presence of God. In fact, the word, spirit, has three different possible meanings. It can refer to wind, a person's breath, or God's presence. Speaking to Nicodemus in chapter three of the Gospel of John, Jesus compared the Spirit of God to the sound of a gentle breeze. He explained to Nicodemus that we can't see the wind, but we know it's both present and real because we can both feel and hear it. The same is true with fire. It too is a sign of God's presence. When Moses brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, God led them by appearing as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. In both the wind and the fire, the Spirit of God was definitely present on the day of Pentecost.

Furthermore, the apostles and those with them were baptized, immersed in the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus had promised. They experienced what it means to be filled with the "power" of God. When God touches a person's life with the Holy Spirit, that individual is able to do extraordinary things. For example, after telling King Ahab to head home in his chariot because a great rainstorm would soon descend upon them, the Scriptures tell us, "The power of the LORD came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel" (1 Kings 18:46). On the day of Pentecost God also gave an extraordinary and powerful gift to those who were now filled with His Spirit. They became multi-lingual. They began to speak in languages they had never learned or known. That's why the Jewish pilgrims who had come from a whole host of countries for

the feast of Pentecost could understand what the Apostles were saying. They were speaking in their native tongues, the languages that they spoke back home.

God empowers us with His Holy Spirit. He gives us what we need to accomplish His work here on earth, like the physical strength He gave to Samson or the wisdom He gave to Solomon. On the day of Pentecost it was a gift of language. Each of the apostles and perhaps some of the other followers of Christ were speaking in such a way that everyone could understand them. The crowd of spectators who had been drawn to this scene by the sound of the rushing wind and who were now hearing a multitude of languages, said to one another, "We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues." This extraordinary gifting had created an opportunity for God to prepare their hearts for a message of hope and deliverance. The same is true today. There have been reports from various places on foreign mission fields around the world where God has empowered His missionaries with this same linguistic gift for the purpose of declaring the wonders of God.

This brings us to that last word, "proclamation." Amazed and perplexed by what they had seen and heard, the people who had witnessed these wonderful events began to ask one another, "What does all of this mean?" It was like the salesman who responded to this kind of an inquiry with this famous response, "I'm so glad you asked that question." The audience had been prepared by God to eagerly hear the very first New Testament sermon and guess who delivered it? It was none other than the great big fisherman, Peter. Beginning in verse 14 of the second chapter of Acts and continuing to verse 36, he delivered his very first sermon. Was it a great sermon? To modern ears it might seem a bit difficult to fully understand. But Peter was not preaching to us. He was speaking to the people of his own day and time, fellow Jews who knew and understood everything he said. In fact, they were so moved by Peter's message that when he concluded his sermon, they cried out to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers what shall we do?" Peter told them to repent and be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ so that their sins might be forgiven and so that they too might receive the Holy Spirit. That very day, the birthday of Christianity, three thousand new Christians were added to the roll book of heaven.

Now, what about you and me? Are there any lessons in this account which are applicable to our lives? First of all, it's difficult, if not impossible to sense God's presence without prayer. Prayer is like turning on a radio. If you don't turn it on, you will never hear a thing. If you don't reach out to God, even if your prayer is not much more than a mumbled request or a pitiful cry for help, it's doubtful if you will ever experience the Lord's life changing presence. Second, God's presence is often serendipitous. It surprises us. Yes, the followers of Christ were certain that God would keep His promise, filling them with His Spirit, but they did not know

when that would happen. It came upon them suddenly, perhaps when they least expected it and the same is often true for us as well. Third, God's presence is always powerful. It changes us. It transformed an uneducated shoe salesman into one of the greatest evangelists of the nineteenth century. Speaking about the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in his own life, Dwight L. Moody recounted an event that took place on the streets of New York. He said, "Right there, on the street, the fire of God seemed to come upon me so wonderfully that I asked God to stay His hand. I was filled with the sense of God's goodness, and I felt as though I could take the whole world to my heart." And that he did, preaching to thousands all across America and even traveling to Great Britain. Finally, being filled with God's Spirit means proclaiming the wonders of God's love, telling others about His goodness and salvation by what we say, how we live and what we do. It means joining that Spirit filled company of believers who were blessed by God with Pentecostal fire on the birthday of Christianity.