

“How To Start A Fire” January 30, 2022

Kenneth Scott Latourette -- he was a professor at Yale -- said, “The more one examines the various factors which seem to account for the extraordinary victory of Christianity, (by that he means how it became the largest religion in the world, quickly swept the Roman Empire, and influenced so much of thought and society, especially in the West) the more one is driven to search for a cause underlying them all. It is clear that at the very beginning of Christianity there must have occurred a vast release of energy virtually unequaled in history... Nothing else could explain the surge of the early Christian movement. What caused this release of energy...lies outside the realm in which modern historians are supposed to move.”

But then he goes on to say, “But before I am a historian, I am human... How can I close my eyes to the obvious explanation that something supernatural happened?”

When Yale historians call something “obviously supernatural” it gets my attention.

Last week, we saw how Jesus told His disciples to wait on him to send His Spirit to his followers. He said they would receive “power.” Power to do what he had told them to go and do. Power to do what we now know they did do. To spread the message and the reality of the kingdom of God by being what Jesus calls “witnesses” to it. Today we will see what it looked like when that power came.

And it is, in fact, supernatural. There is a good bit that needs explanation so I’ll do a lot of teaching as we work through it, and then draw some application at the end.

Acts 2:1 [1] When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place.

“They” there being Jesus’ followers who he told to wait for him to send his Spirit.

Let me give you a little background on the day of Pentecost.

It was called “Shavuot” in Hebrew and was a harvest festival. We see it established in Exodus 23...

It was one of 3 national celebrations that were “pilgrim” festivals where Jewish men and women were expected to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem from wherever they were to celebrate it.

50 days earlier on Sunday, the end of Passover week, there was another festival called the Feast of Firstfruits.

At the Feast of Firstfruits, the Israelites offered the very first part of the harvest, and they didn’t eat anything from the crop until they gave its initial portion to the Lord. This required faith on the part of the Israelites, as they would be giving the offering of firstfruits at a time when not much was ready to be harvested. They had to trust God that He would indeed provide the full crop.

50 days later, the people of Israel would reconvene in Jerusalem and celebrate the LORD’s provision. Celebrate 50 days later that He had done what He promised to do and brought a harvest.

And that’s actually what Pentecost means. Pentecost is Greek for “fiftieth”. It’s the Jewish celebration of the “Feast of Weeks” - namely 7 weeks, or 50 days after Passover. So Jewish men and women who lived in all sorts of other places all happen to be back in Jerusalem at this moment.

Acts 2:2–4 [2] And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. [3] And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them.

So Luke says it was a sound “like” wind and appeared “like” fire. So you can tell that something is happening here and Luke is struggling to find human language to describe it. There aren’t words for what it was, so he says what it’s “like.” It wasn’t wind and it wasn’t fire, but that’s what it sounded like and that’s what it looked like.

Now, there is more going on here than meets the eye. This is a narrative convention that Bible writers used from time to time, where they overlay themes from other portions of scripture. Sometimes they layer the writings with all of these different callbacks and homages to things written elsewhere in the library of Scripture. And the two he’s using here are wind and fire.

Wind in Hebrew can be translated as wind, breath, spirit. All the same word. It’s the primary imagery in the old testament used to speak of God’s presence. Mighty winds, clouds, storms, or breath are all used as images of God’s presence, oftentimes used in association with the tabernacle/temple in the Old Testament.

Fire is much the same. We see it used in virtually all the events at Mt. Sinai and with the people of Israel that indicates God’s presence - there’s the burning bush, and Moses on the mountain receiving the Torah - which, note again, became associated with the Pentecost celebration in Israel - and then there is the tabernacle - both are actually present here - when God’s presence dramatically and powerfully fills the holiest place.

And so, what Luke is communicating here is something much more than a loud sound and gust of wind and strange fiery tongues consuming the disciples; he’s telling us in this beautiful Jewish way that the very Presence of God was filling them.

What was taking place in the tabernacle and temple was now taking place in them... God’s people were becoming His Temple... His presence and His power were now indwelling them.

[4] And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

That word for tongue there is languages. It says they began to speak in different languages. And that’s significant, remember, because it’s Pentecost. And Jewish people from all over are gathered there.

[5] Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. [6] And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. [7] And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? [8] And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? [9] Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, [10] Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, [11] both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.”

So we’ve got Jews and non-Jewish people who had converted to Judaism - called proselytes - from all corners of the known world in Jerusalem. And they hear these men and women talking about “the mighty works of God” but not in the Greek or Aramaic, the common languages of the day, but in their own native language. And it says they are bewildered, amazed, and astonished.

12 And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

So they are bewildered, amazed, astonished, and perplexed. This has really thrown them for a loop and Luke really wants for you to know how confused they are by this.

13 But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.” **14** But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. **15** For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day.

This is the first recorded sermon after Jesus’s resurrection. The first public proclamation that God has raised Jesus from the dead. And Peter's intro, to his sermon, is “Men of Israel! We’re not drunk because it’s only 9am.”

Can you imagine if that was my sermon intro one Sunday? “Midtown family, good morning. I am not drunk right now because it is only 10 am.”

In all seriousness, this is another one of those little things that strengthens my confidence that it’s true. That it’s actually what happened and what Peter said. If not, why would you put this in there? If you’re making the story up, what benefit is it to include this? It’s in there because it’s what happened. And Luke wrote down what happened.

So Peter stands up and he delivers his first sermon in order to answer their question and he leads in with a quote from an Old Testament prophecy concerning the Kingdom from the prophet Joel.

16 But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: **17** ““And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; **18** even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. **19** And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; **20** the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. **21** And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.””

Essentially, God enables the prophet Joel to look out on the horizon of human history, and makes a promise to God’s people that one day, God is going to come and make right what their sin has made wrong; and, towards the tail end of the second chapter God says that an indication of this day will be that He will pour His Spirit out on all of humanity - it won’t be reserved for the temple or the prophets alone anymore... but all people, men and women, young and old - will receive His Spirit... this will be a sign that the Kingdom - God’s salvation and reconciliation - is at hand.

22 “Men of Israel, hear these words: 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— **23** this Jesus, [c] delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. **24** God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.”

Peter is saying... What you are seeing is what was prophesied. His Spirit is being poured out SO THAT you will know that Jesus is, in fact, the Christ, the Messiah, the forever King of God’s Kingdom... and He is Lord, there is no other.

The meaning of everything you're witnessing today is that the long awaited arrival of God's Kingdom is at hand. The one to make right what sin has made wrong - to restore the Kingdom and accomplish God's purposes to defeat sin, death, and the devil forever... has done it.

25 "For David says concerning him..."

Now Peter is gonna quote something from King David in Psalm 110. I want you to notice, because Peter is talking to a Jewish audience, they believed the Old Testament was the word of God. They were very familiar with it. So Peter references significantly and uses it to show that it predicts and points to Jesus, and how Jesus is the fulfillment of all that was promised regarding a coming Messiah. As we move through the book of Acts, when the apostles are in front of a crowd that is less familiar with the Old Testament, they don't pull from it nearly as much and use other lines of reasoning and arguments for why people should trust Jesus.

25 "For David says concerning him, 'I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; **26** therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. **27** For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. **28** You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.' **29** Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. **30** Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, **31** he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. **32** This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. **33** 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. **34** For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, **35** until I make your enemies your footstool.'" **36** Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Peter says that when David wrote this, he was actually talking about Jesus. Jesus is the one who didn't die. And we are witnesses to that fact. We saw him die. We saw him alive again. We talked to him, ate with him, and touched him. He is alive. And you can "know for certain" that he is both Lord and Christ. Lord - kyrios. Owner, master, the one with the authority. He to whom a person or thing belongs. Christ - messiah. Deliverer. Savior. Healer, redeemer. The one who's come to fix everything that's gone wrong and heal the world. He's the sovereign ruler of the universe and he loves you and he's come to save you. You can be certain. He's both.

37 Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" **38** 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. **39** 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." **40** And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." **41** So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

So this is a huge wave of people who respond. Who realized they were wrong, that Jesus was the Messiah, who all hopped into the movement and became part of the church. A multiethnic, wildly diverse group who are now, together, God's people. And we will see in Acts as well as the rest of the New Testament, all the messes that have to get sorted out as these people learn how to be God's people together.

I wanna draw our attention to a couple of things here. What Peter says here, and then their response. So they ask, what should we do? And Peter says ‘repent.’

The word **repent** is the Greek verb “**metanoëō**” (meta-ni-a-o). Literally, it means a change of mind, or to think differently afterwards. It was a military term that described a soldier marching in one direction and then doing an about-face. It often involves the idea of “turning,” from one way of thinking and living to a different way. So Peter is saying, you’ve been wrong about Jesus. He is in fact the Messiah who’s come to deliver us. You need to change your mind; turn from sin to him.

Thomas Watson in Doctrine of Repentance - “Turning away from sin and turning to God.”

"Repent" - I want for you to see it two ways. I want you to hold them in balance. Both Lord and Christ. Some of you like one more than the other. Some Christians and ministries are entirely out of balance with this. This call to repent, I want you to hear it in two different tones. Both are necessary and biblical. The first way to hear is with all the warmth and gentleness and kindness and compassion of a devoted father who loves you and likes you and wants you with him. Like the dad in the prodigal son story who is watching to see if his son will return home, and once he sees him he runs out to him and wraps his arms around him and celebrates "My son is back! He's home." You need to hear the call to repent as your heavenly father who loves you, inviting you to come home to him. "Stop running from me. I'm what you need. And I'm right here. Come home."

That's the first way you should think about the call to repent.

Here's the second. Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth and he's He's commanding. Repent. Your knee is going to bow to him at some point, either way. Right now, you're part of the wrong kingdom with the wrong lord heading the wrong direction. You've crossed the king and you'd better make things right because you don't want those problems. And right now the Lord is telling you what to do. Repent. People tend to prefer one of those tones to the other and given our cultural moment it's not hard for me to guess which one of those you probably prefer. But both are entirely biblical. We need to remember both are true. And you can see them here in Peter's language.

'This is for everyone! All who are far off! Come home! This is amazing, God has made a way for us. His kingdom is here and you can enter it! Come home.'

And also, 'God came to you in human flesh and you killed him. Then he rose from the dead and he's now Lord of all the earth and you've got a huge problem on your hands, so you'd better get right with him, quickly.'

Peter's words are “Repent and be baptized, every one of you.” Then he says, “This is for you and your children and for all who are far off.”

I love this. It's so different from basically anything else out there.

There are some who don't think they need to repent. And then there are some who don't think they are invited. Peter says this is for everyone. For all those far off. Everyone needs to repent. And everyone is invited.

You're rich? Repent. You're poor? Repent. You're Democrat? Repent. Republican? Repent. Apolitical? Repent. White? Repent. Black? Repent. Man? Repent. Woman? Repent. Heterosexual? Repent? You'd label yourself a sexual minority? Repent.

Everyone turns people into good guys and bad guys. “They are the problem and we are the solution.” Not true. Therefore, not what God says. People are the problem. He is the solution. Everyone needs to repent.

Peter has to know how risky this is. He's in the same spot where Jesus was killed 50 days before and he's just identified himself with Jesus. The same thing could've happened to him. The difference is, this time the spirit cuts them to the heart.

So right before 2021, my wife decided that she wanted to read through the Bible in a year. So she got some of the women in our LifeGroup, and they read through the Bible together last year. Literally cover to cover. Their last reading was December 31st. Afterwards, we were talking and I said, "Ok, you read the whole Bible chronologically, all the way through. What stood out most to you? What did you notice? What became clear as you read through it?" and she said, without hesitation, "It's unbelievable how much God wants to be with people. That guy does so much to try and be with people. He gives chance after chance after chance. He is constantly pursuing a way to be in relationship with people. Cover to cover."

In fact, in this passage, I want you to notice how much God wants people from every corner of the earth to know him and participate in his kingdom. Look at all the barriers the spirit of God overcomes to make it happen.

Geographical barriers. These people are scattered all over the place. And the Spirit chooses to move at Pentecost so that people from all over would be brought in.

There are language barriers. The Spirit says, "That's a solvable problem." And he enables the apostles to speak in the native languages of the crowd.

The message, I mean, good gosh Peter just spent this whole sermon basically saying, "I know you guys have studied and learned the Old Testament scriptures your entire life as Jews, but you're completely wrong. Basically your whole worldview is wrong. You were dead wrong about the Messiah, about Jesus...and instead of worshiping him you killed him." Is it your experience that people, particularly religious people, respond favorably when told they are completely and totally wrong? I mean, Jesus's message was basically, "You are wrong about the Messiah. I am him." And they killed him for it. And here is Peter saying, "You are wrong about the Messiah. Jesus is him." There is no reason not to expect the same reaction now. "Ok, crucify him, too. I don't want to hear this blasphemous trash again." If they were modern westerners, they would've said, "It's hurtful to be shamed for my trauma response to growing up in an abusive, toxic, religious environment...cancel him!" Instead...the Spirit of God quote 'cuts them to the heart.'

He cut right through their defenses and their resistance and their unbelief, and they realize, "This is true and I have to respond. What do we need to do?"

So much so that a Yale professor has to summarize these events and what happens moving forward as "obviously supernatural."

You know, sometimes when I read this I get caught up in the size and scope of it. 3000 people, that's incredible. God really did something amazing. And that's totally true. But I wouldn't want for us to miss that it's just as amazing that the Spirit of God cut through your defenses, for those of you who are Christians. It's just as much a miracle that God pursued you. That he overcame your barriers to him, whatever they were.

Some of you, a few years ago, wouldn't have believed today you'd be a Christian who loves Jesus and joined a church and is really involved. You'd say, "No chance of that happening." And you would've given all sorts of reasons. All sorts of barriers. But here you are. Loving Jesus. Because the Holy Spirit overcomes barriers, he cuts people to the heart. He makes the truth about Jesus not just evident to us, but helps us realize why it changes everything.

I recently came across a book about how CS Lewis became a Christian. He was a professor at Oxford and Cambridge.

CS Lewis famously used to describe himself as a reluctant convert. That's the name of the book. The Most Reluctant Convert. It's been adapted into a one man stage play as well as a film, so they are covering all the genres.

But the book begins with 2 quotes. At age seventeen, Lewis wrote to longtime friend Arthur Greeves, "I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them, and from a philosophical standpoint Christianity is not even the best." How is that for some barriers?

And yet, Fifteen years later, Lewis wrote to the same friend, "Christianity is God expressing Himself through ...the actual incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection."

To use Luke's language, he was cut to the heart.

For those of you who are not Christians, I would just say...you can run from God...but he's a lot faster than you. And he really wants to be with people. And not just people, but with you.

And then Peter says we should be baptized. In the Greek it's baptizo. It means to sink or submerge. Like if a ship sunk while out at sea, they would say the ship baptizo'd.

Baptism is a public alignment with Jesus. It's an external action to show an internal change. Jesus is my Lord and Savior. Lord and Christ. It's a visible symbol of an invisible reality. I have repented and I belong to Jesus, and what he says goes.

This might be a next step for some of you. You're a Christian who has repented and trusted Jesus by faith, but you haven't been baptized. You can sign up to be baptized today. And if you're thinking, "I've repented and Jesus is my Lord, but I'm not gonna get baptized." I would invite you to think that through again. Because you've basically said, "Jesus, I've reconsidered and you really are who you said you were. I'm turning from sin to you. You are my Lord, whatever you say goes. And he says, "Ok, get baptized." And you said, "Oh no, I'm not gonna do that."

It's a little bit like me coming to you and saying, "I've reconsidered guys. I'm not gonna eat meat anymore. Animals have feelings, and I think it hurts their feelings when we eat them. I'm now a vegetarian. But, I am gonna eat this steak right here."

Have you actually reconsidered and changed your mind? Is Jesus actually the Lord of your life if the first thing he says to do, you say no? I'm not trying to pick a fight. I just want words to mean things.

So the invitation today is exactly what Peter says we should do. Repent and be baptized. Yield. Bow our knee here and now to the king of the universe and our loving heavenly father. And let's claim the promise that Peter mentioned for all who are far off...that we can be forgiven by God through Jesus and filled with His Spirit to continue the mission here and now.

So let's have some time to respond now. Take communion remembering the body and blood of Jesus broken and spilled for us.