

Preparation

[PREPARATION]

✦ GETTING READY

What are the consequences of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit?

Read Acts 2.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand Luke's vision for gospel proclamation and gospel response in the power of the Holy Spirit.

[THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The Holy Spirit empowers both the proclamation of the Word and the faithful response of devoted repentance.

✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Peter used Psalm 110:1 to support his claim that Jesus's ascension into heaven was His enthronement by the Father as "Lord" of heaven and earth. While Jesus was called Lord throughout the Gospels, His exaltation and enthronement mark an official transition in the way His witnesses talked about Him. From then on, Jesus was not only the Christ, or the Messiah; He was also Lord of all.

✦ MEDITATE

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

[GETTING STARTED]

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

QUESTION *What is the mission of the Holy Spirit?*

QUESTION *How does the Holy Spirit add individuals to the church?*

What comes to mind when you think about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit? Do you picture a series of miracles, a stunning visual display, a large worship service?

When Luke told the story of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, he used sensory language—“a sound like a mighty rushing wind,” “divided tongues as of fire” that “appeared” (vv. 2–3). Over the course of the story, there were signs and wonders (vv. 6–8, 43), but Luke didn’t linger long over those details. The heart of Acts 2 is Peter’s sermon, with the climax being the people’s response. The first fruit of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was mass repentance and corporate devotion, which this chapter gives us an iconic view of.

✦ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Acts 2:1–13 sets the scene and shows the disciples’ Spirit-filled ability to speak in languages understood by “devout men from every nation.” This scene reversed the story of the Tower of Babel and signified the Spirit’s mission to reunite people from all nations. Acts 2:14–36 recounts Peter’s proclamation, in which he took three passages from the Scriptures and used them to explain the outpouring of the Spirit and the enthronement of Jesus. Acts 2:37–47 captures the people’s response of repentance and devotion, giving us a window into the foundational practices of the first converts.

1. *The Holy Spirit descended*
2. *Peter preached*
3. *The people responded*

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 2.

1. The Holy Spirit descended

+ READ GENESIS 11:1-9; ACTS 2:1-13

QUESTION *In Genesis 11:1-9, why did God confuse the language of the people? What was He preventing?*

QUESTION *In Acts 2:1-13, what allusions do you see Luke making to the Old Testament?*

Perhaps no chapter in the book of Acts is as dependent on the Old Testament as this one. Luke began the story by pointing out it was “the day of Pentecost,” and everyone was “together in one place” (v. 1). That was because the Day of Pentecost was one of the Jew’s three “convocations” or pilgrimage festivals, the three high holidays over the course of the year when everyone who could, came to Jerusalem. Pentecost celebrated both the giving of the Law at Sinai and the beginning of the wheat harvest (see Exodus 23:16; Leviticus 23:15-21). To this day, Christians embrace Pentecost as a kind of harvest of souls (see, for example, John 4:35).

In verse 2, Luke described the “rushing wind.” When the first readers of this book heard these words, their minds would have recalled the Spirit’s hovering over creation in Genesis 1:2 and His resuscitation of the “dry bones” in Ezekiel 37:9-14. Luke was setting up his Pentecost story with the themes of new creation and new life.

In verses 3-4, tongues of fire “rested” on each of the disciples as they were filled with the Holy Spirit. The primary background for this passage doesn’t come from the Old Testament but from John’s words just before he baptized Jesus: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11). The miraculous sign accompanying this baptism was their sudden and inexplicable ability to speak in languages not their own that were understood by the diverse groups of people around them who had also come to celebrate Pentecost (verses 4, 6).

At this point it helps to review two key passages from the Old Testament, the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 and the story of Abram's call in Genesis 12. Genesis 11 starts by pointing out that all the people spoke the same language (v. 1). As a result, they were able to collaborate in their prideful project of building a tower "with its top in the heavens" (v. 4). To stymie their pride, or keep them humble, God "confused their language" (vv. 7, 9), causing them to disperse and the project to die on the vine. In Genesis 12 God called Abram out of this dispersion, telling him He would make Abram "a great nation" (v. 2). Though Abram had to leave home and settle a new land, God would bless everyone who blessed him and curse those who cursed him (v. 3).

Turn again to Acts 2, picking up at v. 4. After confusing the language of the nations in Genesis 11:7 and 9, God gave the disciples the miraculous ability to speak in such a way that these "devout men from every nation" understood (vv. 5–8). To drive the point home, Luke listed seventeen different language groups present that day. In the face of this miraculous sign, people responded in two ways. Some opened their hearts and minds to this phenomenon, approaching it with wonder and curiosity: "What does this mean?" (v. 12). Others, quick to write it off, said the men were drunk (v. 13).

Putting the pieces and allusions together, here is the picture Luke has painted. On a day when devout Jews had come to thank God for the harvest, the Spirit blew as He had in creation, breathing new life into people who would become the harvest of God. Where He had formerly divided the people into different nations, God now began a new work of unity—reconciling the nations of the world into a community who would understand and collaborate with one another in the household of God. In this narrative, Luke presented the Holy Spirit as a harvesting force who inspires speech, breaks divisions, makes understanding possible, and creates new unity.

QUESTION *How does the story of Pentecost reverse the story of the Tower of Babel?*

QUESTION *How did Luke characterize the person and work of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1–13?*

APPLICATION POINT / First, we should recognize the Holy Spirit as a unifier. Just as God reversed the division of Babel by enabling the disciples to speak languages understood by all nations, the Holy Spirit continues to break down barriers between people today. While we shouldn't expect the Spirit to descend in tongues of visible flame or give us fluency in French overnight, we *should* expect the Spirit to help us communicate the gospel to people in ways we couldn't in our own strength. Paul described God's mission as "breaking down in [Christ's] flesh the dividing wall of hostility ... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace" (Ephesians 2:14–15).

Second, we should celebrate and find ways to participate in God's global mission. By reversing the divisions He prudently created at Babel, God showed His heart for gathering people from every nation into one unified family. Participating in God's global mission doesn't necessarily mean quitting your job and moving overseas, although sometimes it does. As we continue our study of The Acts of the Apostles, consider how you could devote more of your time, treasure, or talents to the church's ongoing efforts to reach the nations with the gospel of Christ.

QUESTION *How does the Spirit accomplish unity? How can we participate in this mission?*

QUESTION *How are you participating in God's global mission already?*

2. Peter preached

✚ READ ACTS 2:14-36

QUESTION *What points did Peter make in his sermon?*

QUESTION *What do you notice about the ways he commented on and interpreted these three Scripture passages?*

In Acts 2:14–36, Peter “strengthens the brothers” again by delivering what some have called the first Christian sermon, bearing witness to the resurrection while reciting and interpreting three passages of Scripture: Joel 2:28–32; Psalm 16:8–11; and Psalm 110:1. If you were to flip back and forth between Acts and these Old Testament passages, you might notice some significant differences in the wording. The reason for this is that Peter would have been quoting from what we call the Septuagint (LXX), a popular Greek translation of the Old Testament, where the Old Testament in our Bibles has been translated from Hebrew manuscripts (MT). Peter was not misquoting the Old Testament; he was simply reciting texts he’d learned and memorized from a different translation.

In verses 14–15, Peter refuted the accusations of drunkenness. In his opening words, he showed himself to be empowered by the Spirit, speaking with newfound courage and clarity. And just as Jesus had said, the gospel message began to spread in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 1:8).

In verses 16–21, Peter explained the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that has just occurred (v. 4) by reminding the people of the prophecy in Joel 2:28–32, reciting the entire passage. In these verses, Joel looked forward to a time—the last days—when God would “pour out” his Spirit on all flesh (v. 17). By “all flesh,” Joel meant all people, irrespective of age, sex, or social status: “your sons and your daughters ... your young men ... your old men ... male servants and female servants” (Joel 2:17–18). When the Spirit was poured on them, Joel said, they would prophesy, see visions, and dream dreams. Two parts of this prophecy are especially important for this book. First, Joel said God would show “wonders” in heaven and “signs” on earth (v. 19). Second, this would be an upsetting and unsettling time (v. 20) during which whoever cried to the Lord for salvation would indeed be saved (v. 21).

Peter proclaimed Jesus’s resurrection in verses 22–24. First, he linked Jesus’s “mighty works and wonders and signs” that his audience had seen or heard about to the wonders and signs in Joel 2:30 (cf. Acts 2:19). Those works of Jesus’s, said Peter, were a fulfillment of what Joel prophesied. Then, Peter described the significance in his own words, adding his own theological reflection on the event. He described Jesus’s death as planned and foreknown by God (v. 23) and depicted the resurrection as God unbinding the cords by which death had tied Him down (*lusas tas dinas tou thanatou*, v. 24). This metaphor was picked up by subsequent Christian preachers, like Polycarp in *Epistle of Polycarp*, 1.2.

In verses 25–28, Peter recited a second passage of Scripture, this one from Psalm 16:8–11. In this psalm, David expressed his hope that God would not ultimately abandon his soul to Hades or “let [his] Holy One see corruption” (v. 27). In verses 29–33, Peter commented on this Scripture, pointing out that David remained dead (v. 29). Therefore, in these words, David must have been referring in some way to the promise God made to give him a lasting throne (v. 30; cf. 2 Samuel 7:12–16). Jesus was not abandoned to corruption (v. 31) but was raised up (v. 32) and set on the throne of heaven (v. 33a) from which He poured out His Spirit (v. 33b).

In verses 34–36, Peter quoted and explained Psalm 110:1. In this passage, David described a direct address he himself wasn’t a part of: “*The Lord said to my Lord ...*”. Throughout history, Christian commentators have pointed out that in these words David was describing God the Father enthroning Jesus, or God the Son. Psalm 110 is not only the most quoted psalm in the New Testament but also one of the most quoted psalms of the church fathers. Peter concluded his sermon by proclaiming Jesus was not only the Christ (meaning “Messiah” or “Anointed One”) but also Lord of heaven and earth, having been raised and exalted by God (v. 36). He didn’t beat around the bush either; for the second time, Peter pointed out that “you crucified” Him (vv. 23, 36).

QUESTION *How does Peter's sermon help you understand what it means to proclaim Jesus's resurrection?*

QUESTION *How does this change the way you read passages like Psalm 16? How might this change the way you read other psalms?*

APPLICATION POINT / First, we should ask the Spirit to empower us to bear witness to Jesus. In Acts 1:8, Jesus told His disciples the Holy Spirit would give them power to be His witnesses. We see this power in action for the first time in Acts 2:14–36. Just as in the days of Peter and the apostles, Jesus pours His Spirit onto His church to embolden us to bear witness to the ways we've seen His glory and experienced His life-giving power and understood the Scriptures. Ask the Spirit to make you, like Peter, bold to bear witness to Jesus.

Second, we should reflect on the Scriptures through the lens of the life of Jesus. The Old Testament tells the story of a people who were brought out of Egypt, settled in a land, exiled, and then brought back home as a redeemed community. The Gospels tell the story of a person, Jesus, who came up out of Egypt, ministered in Galilee and Jerusalem, was sentenced to death, and then raised back to life. At every point, the story of the Old Testament corresponds to an experience of Jesus. When we read the Scriptures or even the events of our lives and the world around us, we can note the ways they match the pattern of the life of Christ, "in whom all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). If we do, we will have the same kind of insight into the Scriptures and the world that Peter had.

QUESTION *What would it look like to ask the Spirit to give you boldness?*

QUESTION *How would reading the psalms as pointing to Jesus deepen your Bible reading and your prayer life?*

3. *The people responded*

✚ **READ LUKE 3:10–14; ACTS 2:37–47**

QUESTION *How did the people respond to the sermon?*

QUESTION *What echoes of Luke 3:10–14 do you hear in Acts 2:37–47?*

Acts 2:37–47 narrates the people’s response to Peter’s sermon and then provides a famous depiction of the life of the early Christian community.

In verse 37, Luke described the people as having been “cut to the heart.” This recalls a picture painted by the prophet Zechariah during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah: “I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him ...” (Zechariah 12:10). Luke saw Zechariah’s prophecy being fulfilled and credited Jesus with “pouring out” on these people both a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy. They simply asked in response, “What shall we do?” This response has become a well-known line in what we call homiletics, or the study of preaching. When people are “cut to the heart” by the Word of God (see Hebrews 4:12), the question “What shall we do?” is an ideal response. This response also echoes the response the crowds gave John the Baptist after his preaching: “And the crowds asked him, ‘What then shall we do?’” (Luke 3:10).

In verses 38–40, Peter told them. First, he told them to “repent.” John the Baptist made his own message of repentance very practical: “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise;” “Collect no more than you are authorized to do;” and “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages” (Luke 3:11–14). We aren’t told exactly how Peter told people to repent, but Luke did say, “with many other words he ... continued to exhort them” (v. 40). It can be difficult sometimes to understand what repentance looks like. John the Baptist had a pretty good idea of people’s characteristic sins, based on how they dressed and their place in society. Many times, repentance simply comes down to divesting ourselves of what we’ve hoarded and becoming more serious in our generosity. What’s at stake, said Peter, is our entanglement in our “crooked generation,” constantly and subtly being encouraged to follow after ungodliness.

In verse 41, everyone who received Peter’s word followed his instruction to be baptized (cf. v. 38). Luke then said “about three thousand souls” were saved. Luke’s mention of “three thousand souls” recalls another key Scripture passage. Exodus 32 tells the story of the people immediately breaking God’s covenant by constructing and worshipping a golden calf. In verses 25–29, Moses commanded the Levites

gathered around him to put the idolaters to the death by sword. The narrator records, “That day about three thousand men of the people fell” (v. 28). Immediately following this verse, Moses told the Levites, “Today you have been ordained for the service of the Lord” (v. 29). Back in Acts 2:41, Peter spoke a word that “cut” the people to the heart, and three thousand were added to the community of believers.

In verse 42, those three thousand souls continued their repentance through their devotion to three practices. First, they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching—that is, the kind of apostolic interpretation and application of the Scriptures we just read about in verses 14–41, in the Gospels, and in the Epistles of the New Testament. (Notably, the apostles’ teaching wasn’t just doctrinal but also about how to practice repentance.) Second, they devoted themselves to “the fellowship of the breaking of the bread” (in Greek, this is one phrase). Their ritual commemoration of Jesus’s death bound them together in a community that spilled over into their common lives and involved other meals. Third, they devoted themselves to “the prayers,” which probably refers to the set times of prayer offered at the temple (see, e.g., Acts 3:1). These three practices have correspondences in verses 44–46. The apostles’ teaching corresponds to the practices of generous distribution; the fellowship of the breaking of the bread corresponds to “breaking bread in their homes”; and the prayers correspond to attending the temple together.

During this time, Luke added, the “wonders and signs” prophesied by Joel (Joel 2:30; cf. Acts 2:19) and performed by Jesus (v. 22) continued to be performed by the apostles (v. 43). These wonders and signs only motivated the repentant believers to engage in their devotions more seriously (v. 43). And it is these devotions of generosity, remembrance, and piety that resulted in the Lord adding to their number those who were being saved (v. 47).

QUESTION *What is the significance of the people’s response to the sermon?*

QUESTION *How did the people turn their repentance into habits?*

APPLICATION POINT / First, we should practice asking the question, What shall we do? When we read stories like this one, we are often tempted to measure ourselves against Peter, either imagining we’re called to live up to his example or that such a thing is impossible for us. Statistically speaking, most of us will spend the majority of our lives like these three thousand converts, tasked with responding to the heart-piercing words of the proclaimed gospel and figuring out how to disentangle ourselves from our crooked generation (v. 40). We should seek out leaders, mentors, and disciplers who can speak meaningfully to our stage of life and position in the world and tell us how to live lives of repentance and devotion.

Second, we should engage in communal practices of generosity, commemoration, and piety. When many of us hear the word “devotions” today, we usually think of silent and solitary engagement with the Bible or a spiritual book. But in Acts 2:42, “devotion” looked more like a monastery that offered a summer camp. Groups of people bonded over meals, and others divested themselves of extraneous assets. They attended temple together *several times a day*. What would it look like for us to strengthen our repentance by devoting ourselves—together and out loud—to common practices like these?

QUESTION *Who in your life can you ask to show you how to practice repentance?*

QUESTION *What is today’s equivalent of “the prayers” (2:42; 3:1)?*

[NEXT STEPS]

“What then shall we do?” This is an existential question we all must answer when we’re addressed by God’s Word. But it is also the practical question we must ask those who have devoted their lives to practices of repentance. Like many first-century Jews, we are entangled in a “crooked generation,” and Peter’s exhortation to save ourselves rings true for us today. This week celebrate Jesus’s ascension and outpouring of the Holy Spirit by devoting yourself more deeply to the practices of repentance—generosity, commemoration, and piety—and the Lord will only add to our number those who are being saved.

[PRAY]

+Use this prayer as a guide to praying through these passages this week.

Almighty God, who poured out your Holy Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost, filling them with boldness to proclaim the gospel and forming your church as a people devoted to your Word, fellowship, and prayer: Grant us the same spirit, that we may repent of our sins, proclaim Christ crucified and risen, and live as a community marked by generosity, joy, and worship, to the glory of your name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.