

## **Ripples Part Six. God Pours Out the Spirit Acts 2.1-13**

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**David Henderson**

Have you ever experienced what it's like to try to drive a car without power steering? I still remember vividly the first time it happened to me.

I was sixteen or seventeen, and the serpentine belt on our car snapped while I was driving my dad's Ford LTD, so I tried to pull the car over to the side of the road.

As you probably know, when the serpentine belt breaks, the power steering stops working, and all that extra power that your engine is providing to help you turn your steering wheel disappears.

I felt like a gorilla was under the hood trying with all his might to keep me from turning the wheel. It took everything I had to get the wheel to turn. I wasn't sure I could do it.

When we are first introduced to Jesus, we are amazed to experience the rest and peace that Jesus promises to all those who trade in their heavy burdens for his easy yoke.

But at the same time we're introduced to him, we're introduced to the life he intends for us to live. It's not much. Just deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Jesus into a life of loving and giving and serving and making sacrifices and forgiving and putting others first and laying down your life.

At times, if we're honest with ourselves, that life, the life to which we're called, can feel overwhelming, utterly beyond our strength and capacity to do it.

Which is what makes the passage we are looking at today so incredibly encouraging. Because in this passage we discover the source of power for the Christian life, making possible and even joyful what would otherwise land somewhere between difficult and impossible.

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This winter, spring, and summer, we're doing a study of the Book of Acts, which is the history of the early church, written by Luke, that's found in the New Testament. For the first five Sundays in the series, we stepped back and looked at five overarching themes in the book that run from chapter one to chapter 28. If you missed those, I'd encourage you to go back and give them a listen.

Having finished those, today we go back the beginning and start our way through the whole book, section by section.

Since we've already covered most of the key passages in chapter one, our passage for this morning comes from the second chapter of the Book of Acts, starting in verse one.

## **Acts 2.1**

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

The "they" in this passage is referring to the band of the very first Christ followers – we're told in chapter one there were about a hundred and twenty of them – who stayed in Jerusalem after Jesus ascended to heaven. In both the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts we're told they hung out together and spent time together worshipping and praying.

Pentecost was one of three annual feasts that centered on the Temple in Jerusalem. It celebrates God coming down in the form of fire in the midst of his people and giving the Law to his people on Mount Sinai.

Pentecost was forty days after Passover, which was when Jesus died, so about six weeks have gone by since Jesus died and rose from the dead.

## **Acts 2.2**

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

Let me just pause there for a moment.

In chapter 1 we're told the believers met in an upper room in Jerusalem, likely the room where they celebrated the Last Supper with Jesus, and we're told here at the start of chapter two that they were meeting in a "house."

The text isn't clear. This could be in the same house where we found them in chapter one. Or it could be in the temple grounds. In Luke 24.53, Luke tells us that the first believers met constantly in the temple area, which Jewish people referred to as "The House" (Acts 7.47, Mark 11.17, John 2.16). Given what takes place next, it seems likeliest that that's where they are now – in Solomon's portico in the temple grounds.

Now, at this point the story forks. Kind of like a river dividing when it comes to an island, it goes forward in two different channels.

The rest of chapter two tells the rest of the story from one perspective. It's the story of what happened right after this, when the believers were given the supernatural power to speak in different languages, and then the apostle Peter stood up and explained to the

crowd what was happening, and told them about Jesus as the one who died to reconcile them to God, and who rose again and ascended to the throne as king, and then Peter invites them to put their trust in him.

That's what the rest of the chapter is about, and that will be the focus of next Sunday's message.

But all of that is just one current in the unfolding story. The other part of the story plays out not over the rest of the chapter, but over the rest of the Book of Acts and the rest of the history of the church right up to today. That is the story of God pouring out his Spirit on the church. That's the part of the story we'll be looking at today.

So what I'd like to do now is zero in on verse 3 of chapter 2, and pick up this second stream of the story that runs not only throughout Acts but also throughout the life of the church right up to the present age.

### **Acts 2.2-3**

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit . . .

Verse 3 tells us the first believers were surrounded by a sound like blowing wind, and then something that looked like *flames of fire* came to rest on each of the believers.

Luke doesn't leave us guessing. He spells out for us exactly what this means. Verse 3 says: "and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit."

First about the imagery of fire. And then about the phrase "came to rest."

So what does it mean that tongues of *fire* descend on the believers?

As is so often the case, we can make better sense of the New Testament when we are familiar with the Old Testament, which God used to set the stage for the life and ministry of Jesus and all that followed.

In the Old Testament, as you may be aware, fire is used consistently as an image for God. There are lots of examples. God appears as fire:

- in the vision of Abraham in Genesis 15.7,
- in the bush that Moses saw in Exodus 3.2
- when God descended upon Mt Sinai in Exodus 19.18
- in the pillar of cloud fire that goes before the people in the desert in Exodus 12.21 and Numbers 14.14
- in the cloud fire descending on the Tabernacle in Numbers 9.15-16

- and in the cloud fire descending on the first Temple in Exodus 40.34-35

Interestingly, there is no parallel moment of the cloud fire descending on the second temple, which is the temple that is right next to them where they have gathered in the temple portico. I think that detail is really important as God readies the way for the move from the Old Covenant that centers on the Law to the New Covenant that centers on Christ.

So fire turns out to be one of the most consistent ways God communicates his presence. Why might that be? Why might he pick fire as a symbol for his presence?

Well, think about our human experience with fire. We experience fire as something

- that is outside of our control; it spreads; it seems to have a mind of its own
- that isn't confined to a specific place, like a log or a stone or a person – it leaps and jumps about in unpredictable ways, and can be several places at once
- that is powerful, it transforms everything that it touches
- that is illuminating, dispelling darkness and lighting the way
- that is either wonderful or something to be feared, depending on how we experience it
- that is mysterious and beautiful

In all of those ways God is like fire. So through this imagery of fire God expresses in a miraculous way for all to see that He personally is *coming to rest* on each individual believer.

Literally the word means “sat down or settled upon.” But this same word also means making your place of residence, fixing your abode, not just settling down but settling in.

There is no question, as you read the rest of the Book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament, that we should understand it as having this second meaning here, not of stopping for a moment, just to do this cool miracle, but of stopping and staying, of making a home.

And that's just what Luke says in verse three: “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.”

This all brings us into the wonderful mystery of the Trinity, the Tri-unity, of God, which is the term the church invented to capture the profoundly difficult-to-grasp truth revealed in Scripture that God exists, and has always existed, as one God but in three equal persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Spirit is God. Each is God. And all are God together.

Scripture teaches that, as one united being, God carries out his redemptive purposes in this world. God the Father rules over all. He creates humanity and he initiates the plan of redemption for the sake of humanity.

God the Son carries out the Father's redemptive purposes in this world through his incarnation and crucifixion, by which he reconciles God and humanity, and shares in the Father's rule over this world through his resurrection and ascension.

And God the Spirit applies the redemptive work of the Son to individual human lives, awakening individual men and women and children toward God and reconciling them to God through faith in the Son.

Think about the absolutely boggling, breathtaking reality of what this moment means. This is nothing less than God himself descending and taking up residence in each individual Christian believer. Not just the power of God, or the strength of God, or the wisdom of God, or the gifts of God, or the love of God, but the *person* of God, the *presence* of God.

*God himself* comes down from heaven to *reside* in each individual believer. And that spiritual reality is demonstrated again and again, not only through every page of the Book of Acts, but through every page of the New Testament.

If you are a follower of Jesus, God resides in you. Take just a moment to feel the wonder of that all over again.

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What I'd like to do with the rest of our time is open up three implications from this truth that the God of the universe takes up residence in individual believers by the Holy Spirit.

### **Here's the first implication: Jesus is present to everyone everywhere**

We often focus on the advantage of God the Son becoming *incarnate*, taking on human flesh, becoming a human being.

Because God, who had no body, took on a body and stepped into human history at a specific time and a specific place, we could see his face, hear his voice, feel his touch, watch the example of the way he lived out his life.

That was an amazing gift for those who were there when he walked on the planet. And it continues to be a significant gift for those of us who read the story of his life in the New Testament, and can see him fleshed out again through the words of the gospels.

But we don't often focus on the advantage of God the Spirit *not* being incarnate, of being, to make up a word, *uncarnate*. He does not have a body. Think about what that means.

Because I have a body, I can only be in one place at one time. If I am in West Lafayette on Sunday morning, March 9, 2025, that means I cannot also be in Arad, Romania, or Katmandu, Nepal, or Christchurch, New Zealand, at the same time.

But the Spirit of God, because he has no body, is never limited by space or time.

Jesus gave us the gift of limiting himself to one place and time so we could come to know him. The Spirit gives us the gift of *not* limiting himself to one place and time so we can all *experience* him in all places and at all times.

Now, some of you noticed that the phrase I used on the slide was “Jesus is present to everyone everywhere.” But here we’re talking about *the Spirit* being present to everyone everywhere. Isn’t that two different ideas? Not really.

Turns out, because of the triune nature of God, that means exactly the same thing.

You may have noticed that the Spirit of God has three different names in the Book of Acts. The most common name is the Holy Spirit, which we see in 1.8 and lots of other verses, including this one we’re looking at in chapter two. What that name communicates is that the Spirit is Divine. This is the Spirit of God.

But the two other titles for the Holy Spirit in Acts are very interesting in what they imply. In 5.9 the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of the Lord, and in 16.7 the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of Jesus.

This is what makes that significant. The present-to-everyone-everywhere-always Spirit of God is the way Jesus makes himself present to us now that he has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven. And he told us that would be the case.

I’m sure you remember that before he died, Jesus told his followers that he himself would take up residence in us. You see that, for example, in John chapters 14 and 15. And the idea is echoed through the rest of the New Testament, in passages such as:

II Corinthians 13.5

Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you?

Galatians 2.20

Christ lives in me.

Ephesians 3.17

Christ dwell(s) in our hearts through faith

Colossians 1.27

Christ in you, the hope of glory.

There are lots of passages that affirm that the risen Lord Jesus lives in his followers. But there are two important passages for us to notice in connection with Acts 2.

The first one is John 14.16-21. On his last night with the disciples, Jesus says that the Father will give the Spirit to the church, and when he does, “the *Spirit* will live with you and be with you,” and “on that day *you will realize* that . . . you are in me and *I am in you*.” The Spirit being in you is *me* being in you.

You see the same thing in Romans 8.9-11, where Paul uses interchangeably the expression “the Spirit of God lives in you” and the phrase “Christ is in you.” For the follower of Jesus, they effectively mean the same thing.

The implication? If I am a follower of Christ, right now, in this moment, wherever I am, I can access him. He is with me. And if you are a follower of Christ, right now, in this moment, wherever you are, you can access him too. He is with you. Because you have the Spirit of God, and I have the Spirit of God. We all have equal and uninterrupted access to Jesus at all times.

That means you are never alone. You are never without the one who loves you most and best and most faithfully.

That’s the first implication of this parting of the flames and their coming to rest on all of the believers, and it’s a pretty stunning one.

**Here’s the second implication. It’s equally amazing: We can experience His presence in us.**

There is no part of the Christian life I am ever called upon to live out on my own strength or ability. There is no change I am meant to experience as a person that I am expected to bring about in myself. There is no situation in which I find myself in which I am meant to go it alone and rely on my own resources.

The Christian life as laid out before us by Jesus is challenging and complex and costly and all-encompassing. But I am never expected to live it on my own, out of my own strength. He lives *in me*, and I can experience his difference-making presence in me.

When you read the Book of Acts, this is one of the things that leaps out at you: the Spirit of the Lord is actively intimately powerfully at work in the lives of the believers.

Getting ready for this series I read through the book in one sitting several different times. One of those time, I wrote down every place I saw the work of the Spirit described. Look at this list. It’s pretty amazing. This is what is available to us from within, from the one who has taken up residence in us.

### The Holy Spirit (the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of Jesus)

Gives instructions	Strengthens	Calls
Gives power	Encourages	Appoints
Speaks	Compels	Directs
Fills	Warns	

These words are so personal and intentional and engaged, aren't they?! If you are a follower of Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus is busy at work in you doing all of these things all the time.

He isn't just in you like your appendix is in you, in there somewhere but doing who knows what exactly. He is an active companion and partner in the Christian life, conspiring to do nothing less than equip us and transform us from within.

One of my favorite times when my kids were in their middle school and high school years was giving them rides to school. It was a time to enjoy their company and enter into their day and hear their struggles and encourage them and strengthen them and offer them my perspective and let them know I believed in them.

That's what it's like when the Spirit of God takes up residence inside of us. We're riding in the car together, enjoying each other's company. Not only that. But when he is in the place God intends he would have in our lives, he's the one who's driving.

His presence in my life is a *difference-making* presence. He isn't just present as an idea, or as a feeling. He is present in me as a *person* who loves me and who wants the best for me and who is living his life in me and through me and leading me into the life God has for me.

In the middle of last century a pastor in London began to translate the New Testament into more contemporary language so its power and relevance could be appreciated by the teens he was seeking to disciple. The students called themselves The King's Own. I love that.

He ended up publishing his version of the New Testament. It's called the JB Phillips translation. Once he finished it, he wrote a book about the experience called *New Testament Christianity*. It's a great little book. Listen to what he wrote about the Book of Acts.

The close study of the book commonly called the Acts of the Apostles proved an exhilaration. . . . [In its pages], that miracle which is theoretically unsustainable is performed again and again – human nature is changed.

To put it shortly and in the common phrase, the lasting excitement which follows the reading of this book is this: *The thing works!*



When we come to the Book of Acts . . . we . . . discover in the early preaching of the Gospel, the Good News was . . . primarily an announcement . . . that the real world had broken through into this world in visible, tangible form – in fact, in Christ. God was now knowable.

Simultaneously with this proclamation of Good News . . . was the announcement that the living contemporary Spirit of God was alive and active. We have only to read the book of Acts to see how He, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, empowered, transformed, and guided the early Christians. The Young Church was full of Divine energy and wisdom. . . . No one can honestly read the book of Acts . . . without being impressed with this sense of suprahuman power, wisdom, and authority. God himself is plainly at work in and through these new Christians.

Which brings us back to the analogy of power steering. When the power steering is out, steering the car is next to impossible. But when the power steering works, you can steer a two ton car with a single finger.

Jesus calls us into a life that is incredibly challenging, and requires everything of us, and then he takes up residence in us, and brings his power to bear on every part of our life, working in us, strengthening our resolve and our effort, doing in us what we can't do in ourselves.

Here's what JB Phillips concluded from translating the Book of Acts.

People are being, sometimes suddenly and sometimes step-by-step, transformed. The reason for this is . . . an open secret. In the past, men have striven to please an external God. . . . With the coming of the good news – indeed it is *part* of the Good News – God is prepared to live within . . . those who [put their faith in] him. In [these] writings, we do not read of Jesus as a [mere] Example who lived and died some years before and who must be followed and imitated. On the contrary, the [New Testament] is ablaze with the idea that, if we will believe it, Christ is alive and powerful, ready to enter and transform the lives of even the most unlikely. 37

God is not “over there,” and I'm not having to work hard to try to get from wherever I am over to wherever he is. God is *in here*, and my main responsibility is simply to cooperate with him as he lives his live in and through me.

But his presence isn't just difference-making in me. It makes a difference when I interact with others too. Inevitably, if I am a follower of Jesus, and I spend time with someone, they will begin to have a sense of God present and at work in my life.

**That's the third implication of God giving us his Spirit: Others can experience His presence in us.**

Not only can we experience his difference-making presence in us, but others can experience his difference-making presence in us as well. And they will.

Last weekend when he was here for our missions conference John Hess brought me greetings from an old friend of mine named Ward Ballard, who works with him in Colorado Springs. Ward was one of three of four people I hung out with a lot at Miami University. Ward and Stuart and Carol and Doug – there was just something different about each of them:

They each lived lives of quiet purpose. There was a sort of a beautiful intentionality to each of them.

They were all marked by a sort of strength of humility too. They didn't push themselves into the center. Instead, they each treated me and others like we mattered more than they did.

There was a way they had of being with me and others that elevated whoever they were with, inviting forward a better version of themselves.

There was something different about them, and I was drawn to it.

Over time I discovered that all four of them were Christians. Kind of ironic that I was an atheist who wanted nothing to do with Christianity but the four people I had chosen to be my closest friends were all devoted followers of Jesus. The reason is obvious in hindsight. I was drawn to Jesus in them.

When the Spirit of God takes up residence in us, that means that wherever we go in this life, he travels with us, and whenever others see us, they will see something of him too.

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The Scriptures we've just been looking at teach us that, if we are followers of Jesus, we are filled with the Spirit. It is a done thing.

At the same time, in Ephesians 5.18, the Scriptures also teach us that we are to *be* filled with the Spirit. It is to happen again and again.

The first one refers to receiving the Spirit, which is what happens when we first become followers of Christ. The second one refers to opening ourselves fully to the presence and power and influence of the Spirit within, which is a daily and hourly posture before God.

The two questions before us, then, are:

- Am I a follower of Jesus? Have I opened my life to him and given him my allegiance? If so, then I have the Spirit within.

- Which leads to the second question: to what extent do I submit my life to the governance and guidance of the Spirit of God? How intentional am I to open myself to the transformative work of the Spirit, and to his wisdom and guidance in all things?

Somebody whose devotional writings I've really appreciated in recent years is a Jesuit priest named John Grou, who lived in the 1700s. Obviously as a Protestant I won't agree with everything he writes, but he has some amazing insights into living a life of spiritual intimacy with God.

Listen to what he says in his book *Manual for Interior Souls*:

Jesus Christ lives in us, and we in Him: our thoughts, our feelings, and our actions become identified with His thoughts, His feelings, and His actions. . . . Little by little, we are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. . . .

The whole secret . . . is . . . to [allow] ourselves to be animated and guided in all things by the Spirit, and to beg of Him never to allow us to think or say or do anything which He cannot acknowledge as His own. . . .

Since it is quite certain that . . . Jesus Christ really dwells in us, what can we do better . . . than to place all our conduct in His hands, and to beg of him to guide us in all things, that we may do simply, and humbly, and peacefully, and without [second-guessing], whatever He puts into our hearts to do?

This simple abandonment of ourselves to Jesus Christ, this simple placing of ourselves in His hands, that He may be the first and only motive of our thoughts, our affections, our words, and our actions, is without [doubt] the most excellent disposition we can have, the most [consistent with] the principles of faith, the most glorious to God, and the most efficacious for our own advancement.

It is thus that our life will become the life of Jesus Christ, because He will be the soul and motive principle of our lives. 236-239

God make it so.