

Acts 2:1-4a

Introduction

This morning we come to Acts chapter two and the Day of Pentecost. Earlier, the disciples had asked Jesus, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (1:6). Here in chapter two, we’re going to see the beginning of the restoration of this kingdom to Israel (cf. Peterson) — an Israel of which we’re now a part.

Chapter one has set the stage with the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus (when He was speaking to the apostles about the things concerning the kingdom of God), with the ascension of Jesus into heaven and the promise of His coming again, and with the replacement of Judas Iscariot to bring the number of the apostles back to twelve. Now that the stage is set, in chapter two we see the dawning of the eschatological age. In other words, it’s in chapter two that the kingdom and authority of God’s Messiah breaks in upon the world in its fullness. There really is no way for us to overstate the world-order altering, salvation-historical significance of this moment. There’s no way for us to overstate the significance of this moment for us as those who have believed in Jesus. Luke begins in verse one:

I. Acts 2:1 — And when the day of Pentecost [we’ll talk about Pentecost next week] had fully come [*sympleroo*], they were all together in one place.

This is a somewhat awkward translation (but I believe the best translation) of Luke’s Greek expression. The point obviously isn’t that the day of Pentecost could come partially or incompletely. So what do we mean by translating: “And when the day of Pentecost had fully come” (cf. LSB; KJV)? The NASB translates more simply, “When the day of Pentecost *had come*...” The ESV says: “When the day of Pentecost *arrived*...” Both of these translations are accurate as far as they go. The problem is that they don’t capture the “fuller” meaning (no pun intended) that Luke intends.

There are more obvious words to use if Luke only wanted to speak of the day of Pentecost having “come” or “arrived” (*ginomai* [Lk. 22:14]; *erchomai* [Jn. 13:1]). Luke carefully chooses a word that appears only one time in the Greek Old Testament and only three times in the New Testament (all in Luke/Acts). In Luke chapter eight, Luke describes how the disciples in the boat began to be *swamped* (*sympleroo*) and in danger (Lk. 8:23). In other words, the boat was *filling* with water. In 2 Chronicles, instead of a physical object like a boat being “filled up,” it’s a period of time that’s “filled up.”

➤ 2 Chronicles 36:21 — All the days of [the land’s] desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were filled up [*sympleroo*].

In Luke chapter 9, Luke says:

➤ Luke 9:51 — Now it happened that when the days for [Jesus] to be taken up were soon to be filled up [*sympleroo*], He set His face to go to Jerusalem...

The point in both of these passages is the completing of a set number of days or years specifically on God's redemptive-historical calendar (the days for Jesus to be taken up and the years the land kept sabbath). So here in Acts 2, when Luke says that a single day has been "filled up", at one level he's only saying that this day has arrived ("when the day of Pentecost had come"). But he also means for us to hear that the arrival of this day marks the "filling up" of the time on God's redemptive calendar; the arrival of this day marks the eschatological completion of the time on God's redemptive calendar ("already" and "not yet"). We're reminded of Luke's words in the opening verses of chapter one:

- Acts 1:4-5 — And gathering [the apostles] together, [Jesus] commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to *wait* for the promise of the Father, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit *not many days from now*."

This "waiting" of Jesus' disciples has been the waiting of all God's people since the beginning in Genesis 3. Therefore, in Jesus' "not many days from now" we hear that the years and centuries and millennia on God's redemptive calendar are about to be completed—they're about to be "filled up." On this day of Pentecost, the completed work of Messiah in His life, death, burial, and resurrection will finally be manifested and applied in its eschatological fullness. This is why Luke writes now: "And when the day of Pentecost had *fully come*, they were all together in one place."

II. Acts 2:2 — And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a gale force [*biaios*] rushing [*phero*] wind [*pnoe*], and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.

Can you imagine being there in that room on that day? Notice first of all that this was a noise "like" a gale force rushing wind. It wasn't actually windy in the room, and so this wasn't actually the sound of a literal wind. Notice second of all that this noise is said to have come "from heaven." So what is the meaning of this noise like a gale force rushing wind that comes from heaven?

Some translations say that this was a "mighty" rushing wind, but the Greek word is more vivid. We could translate "violent, forceful, turbulent." The psalmist writes:

- Psalm 47:8 (LES) — By a violent [*biaios*] wind [*pneuma*] you will crush the ships of Tarshish.

But the purpose of this wind is not always destructive and so "violent" may not always be the best translation. We read in Exodus chapter 14:

- Exodus 14:21 (LES; cf. Isa. 11:15-16) — And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the Lord stirred up the sea by a gale force [*biaios*] south wind [*pneuma*]... and made the sea dry ground...

In Psalm 47, the gale force wind crushes the ships of Tarshish. In Exodus 14, the gale force wind parts the waters of the Red Sea. Now here in Acts 2, Luke tells us that the noise that came from heaven was like a gale force *rushing* wind.

The word for rushing is a word that means to drive or propel or carry along. So we read in Acts 27:

- Acts 27:14–15 (cf. 27:17; Job 13:25; 17:1; Isa. 17:13; 64:6; Jer. 13:24; 18:14) — But before very long there rushed down from the land a tempestuous wind [*typhonikos*], called Euraquilo; and when the ship was caught in it and could not face the wind [*anemos*], we gave way to it and let ourselves be carried [driven/swept] along [*phero*].

Isaiah speaks of a “rushing [*phero*] storm”—a storm that sweeps up and carries along everything in its path (Isa. 28:15, 18; 29:6). Here in Acts, we might expect a noise like a gale force rushing wind to be a sign of chaos and destruction. Certainly, it’s the sign of something powerful enough to visit ultimate chaos and destruction upon the world.

But now we have to consider the Greek word for “wind.” The language of “gale force” and “rushing” supports the translation, “wind.” But then there’s this: Except for one other place (Ezek. 13:13), the Greek words for “wind” in both the Old and New Testament are always *anemos* (cf. animate) and *pneuma* (cf. pneumatic)—never *pnoe*. Twenty-four of the twenty-five times that *pnoe* appears in the Bible, it means “breath.” The first time this word appears is in Genesis 2.

- Genesis 2:7 (LES; cf. Job 32:8) — And God formed the man with earth from the land and blew [*emphysao*; Heb. *na-pah*] into his face the **breath** [*pnoe*] of life, and the man came into being as a living soul.

Elihu says:

- Job 33:4 (cf. 27:3) — The Spirit [Gr. *pneuma*] of God has made me, and the breath [Gr. *pnoe*] of the Almighty gives me life.

In the New Testament *pnoe* appears in only one other place. In Acts 17, Paul says:

- Acts 17:25 — ...[God] Himself gives to all people life and breath [*pnoe*] and all things...

When Luke speaks of a gale force, rushing wind, we would have expected him to use one of the more common words for wind: *anemos* or perhaps *pneuma*. Instead, he uses a word that elsewhere in the Bible almost always refers to “breath.” David tells how when he cried out to God for deliverance from his enemies—

- 2 Samuel 22:14–16 (LES; cf. Job 37:10; Isa. 30:28) — The Lord thundered from heaven... the [channels] below the sea were seen and the foundations of the world were uncovered by the rebuke of the Lord from [the wind; *pnoe*] of [the] breath [*pneuma*] of his anger [Heb. “nostrils/anger”].

Here the wind before which the waters of the sea flee—the wind that lays bare the foundations of the world—is nothing less than the breath of God.

So here in Acts chapter two, when the day of Pentecost had “fully come” and the disciples were all together in one place, what is the meaning of this sudden noise that comes from heaven like a gale force rushing wind? On the one hand, it signals the mighty inbreaking of the kingdom of God and of His Messiah. It signals that this kingdom has come with an irresistible power before which no obstacle or enemy—no king or nation—will be able to stand. But more than this, it signals that the kingdom is coming in the mighty power of God to breath into the nostrils of a spiritually dead people the breath of a new spiritual life. In other words, this sound like a gale force rushing wind that comes from heaven and that fills the room where the disciples are gathered represents nothing less than the mighty, life-giving breath of God. Even as God once breathed (*na-pah*; Gr. *emphysao*) into Adam’s nostrils the breath (*n^esa-mah*; Gr. *pnoe*) of life so that he became a living being (*hay ne-pes*; Gr. *zao psyche*), so now God is breathing into the nostrils of all His New Covenant people the eternal—the resurrection—life that belongs to Messiah’s kingdom. Some six hundred years earlier, the prophet Ezekiel had seen a vision of a valley full of dry bones. He writes:

- Ezekiel 37:4–5, 9–14 — Then [Yahweh] said to me, “Prophesy over these bones and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of Yahweh.’ Thus says Lord Yahweh to these bones, ‘Behold, I will cause breath [*ru^ah*; Gr. *pneuma*] to enter you that you may come to life [*hayah*; Gr. *zoe*]... Then [Yahweh] said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says Lord Yahweh, “Come from the four winds [*ru^ah*; Gr. *pneuma*], O breath, and breathe [*na-pah*; Gr. *emphysao*] on these who were killed, that they may come to life.’”” [Can you imagine at this point the sound of a gale force rushing wind?] So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great [army].

Then He said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.’ Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says Lord Yahweh, “Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am Yahweh, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. And I will put My Spirit [or breath; *ru^ah*; Gr. *pneuma*] within you, and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, Yahweh, have spoken and done it,” declares Yahweh.’”

Here in Acts 2, on this day of Pentecost, is the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision (cf. Jn. 3:8). In the arrival of this day, the time on God’s redemptive calendar has been “filled up” and now the kingdom is beginning to be restored to Israel insofar as Israel itself is being raised from death to life. Even as God once breathed into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life so that he became a living being, so now God is breathing into the nostrils of all His New Covenant Israel the eternal—the resurrection—life of Messiah’s kingdom.

We now have the very life of Christ within us through the Spirit of Christ who indwells and fills us; which is to say that we now have the very life of God within us through the Spirit of holiness

(the *Holy Spirit*) who indwells and fills us. This isn't just everlasting life or the promise of life in heaven (though it is both of these things); this is a new principle of life within us *now*. Paul says in Romans 8:

- Romans 8:1-4 — Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

By His Spirit, God has breathed into our nostrils the “breath” of Christ’s own resurrection life—the life of Messiah’s kingdom—so that we might live now to Him (Rom. 6:10-11) — so that we might present ourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and our members as instruments of righteousness to God (Rom. 6:13). This is the miracle of Pentecost.

When the day of Pentecost had fully come, not only was there suddenly the audible sign of a noise from heaven like a gale force rushing wind, there was also a visible sign.

III. Acts 2:3 — And there appeared to them tongues like fire [cf. Isa. 5:24] dividing themselves [*diamerizo*], and they rested on [*epi*] each one of them.

Once again, we see that these were not literal tongues of fire, but “*like*” tongues of fire. So what does this sign mean? First of all, we probably shouldn't imagine a peaceful, gentle, flickering flame hovering over each disciple. If the noise the disciples heard was like a gale force rushing wind, then it's more likely that what they see now is something like tongues of a blazing, consuming fire.

In the Old Testament, the consuming fire symbolizes the reality that God's holy presence is deadly to guilty sinners. In Genesis 3, the way to the tree of life is guarded by the cherubim and a flaming sword (Gen. 3:24). In Genesis 15, Yahweh's presence is represented by “a flame and... a smoking oven and torches of fire” (Gen. 15:17), and we're told that “a great dark fear fell upon [Abram]” (Gen. 15:12). We read in Leviticus ten:

- Leviticus 10:1-2 (cf. Lev. 9:4, 24) — Then Nadab and Abihu... offered strange fire before Yahweh, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of Yahweh and consumed them.

In Exodus 3, the angel of Yahweh appeared to Moses “in a blazing fire.” When Moses turned aside to look, “God called to Him from the midst of the bush and said..., ‘Do not come near here. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground’” (Exod. 3:2-5). In Exodus 19, we read:

- Exodus 19:18, 21 (cf. 24:17; Deut. 4:23-24) — Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because Yahweh descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace...

Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, “Go down, warn the people, lest they break through to Yahweh to see, and many of them perish.”

The consuming fire represents the consuming holiness of God’s presence, and so the fire of God’s holiness is also the fire of His wrath and of His burning anger against sin.

- Isaiah 66:15–16 (cf. Ps. 50:3; 97:3; Isa. 5:24; 10:17; 26:11) — For behold, Yahweh will come in fire And His chariots like the whirlwind, to return His anger with wrath, and His rebuke with flames of fire. For Yahweh will execute judgment by fire and by His sword on all flesh, and those slain by Yahweh will be many.

But there was another, *positive* side to this consuming fire of God’s holiness. The prophets said that one day the fires of God’s judgment would purge all the wicked from out of Israel, leaving only a purified and righteous remnant. Once all the wicked had been removed by the fires of God’s judgment, it was the purified remnant that God would make into His new covenant Israel. So we read in Isaiah:

- Isaiah 4:4 — The Lord [will] wash... away the filth of the daughters of Zion and rinse... away the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of *burning*...
- Isaiah 6:13 (cf. Zech. 13:8-9) — [After judgment and destruction] there will be a tenth portion in [the land], and it will again be subject to *burning*, like a terebinth or like an oak whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.

And in Malachi:

- Malachi 4:1–2 (cf. Mal. 3:1-3; Isa. 33:14-16) — “[B]ehold, the day is coming, *burning like a furnace*; and all the arrogant and every worker of wickedness will be chaff; and the day that is coming will *set them aflame*,” says Yahweh of hosts, “so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall.”

It’s with this background in mind that we hear the words of John the Baptist in Luke chapter 3:

- Luke 3:16–17 — “As for me, I baptize you with water, but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the strap of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit [*pneuma*/breath/wind] **and fire**. His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but He will **burn up** the chaff with unquenchable **fire**.”

The ultimate separation of the wheat from the chaff still awaits Christ’s return (“not yet”); but the purging fires of that final day began to burn (“already”) when the day of Pentecost had “fully come.” The baptism of the Holy Spirit has made, “already,” an eschatological separation between the wheat and the chaff. In the past, those who belonged to the “wheat” and those who belonged to the “chaff” existed together as equal members of the covenant community. But when the *eschatological* Spirit (the Spirit of *Jesus*, the *risen Messiah*) is poured out, the result is that all

those without the Spirit are now excluded from God's New Covenant people (cf. Acts 2:16-18). Paul says, "[I]f anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him" (Rom. 8:9b). Those who do not have the Spirit of Christ are the chaff who, if they do not repent, will be burned up with unquenchable fire, while those who do have the Spirit are the wheat who are already being gathered into Messiah's barn. In the coming of the Spirit, then, we have already today the eschatological separation of the wheat from the chaff. Already, today, the purging, and smelting, and refining fires of God's judgment are burning (Jn. 3:19; 9:39; 16:8; 2 Pet. 2:3).

What does it mean, then, when there appear to the disciples "tongues like fire *dividing themselves, and [resting] on each one of them*"? It means that here is the renewed and purified remnant. Here is the remnant for whom the consuming fire of God's holiness is not a sign of judgment and destruction, but rather the sign of God's gracious and powerful presence with them in and through the Spirit of the risen Messiah. We see a picture of this reality in Isaiah chapter four.

- Isaiah 4:4-5 (cf. Zech. 2:5) — When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and rinsed away the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of *burning*, then Yahweh will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her convocation a cloud by day, even smoke, and *the brightness of a flaming fire* by night; for over all the glory will be a canopy.¹

Remember the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that stood over God's people when they were in the wilderness?² Isaiah describes the future eschatological day of the Messiah using this "pillar of fire" imagery from Israel's past. The fire that is the sign of God's burning and purging presence in judgment (Isa. 4:4) is also the sign of God's protecting and guiding presence in salvation (Isa. 4:5). So Moses prays in Numbers 14:

- Numbers 14:14 (cf. Exod. 13:21-22; Neh. 9:19) — You, O Yahweh, are *in the midst* of this people, for You, O Yahweh, are seen eye to eye, *while Your cloud stands over them* [Gr. "is settled upon (*epi*) them"]; and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.

In the Old Testament, there was one, undivided pillar of fire and cloud that stood over the entire covenant people (a covenant people that included both chaff and wheat). But what do we see here in Acts? Here we see multiple tongues of fire (not veiled in cloud) "dividing themselves" and resting upon "each one of them." Here too, then, we see that a separation is being made. The chaff is being separated from the wheat. And here we also see the blessing of the New Covenant: that all of us in this New Covenant community have the Spirit of the risen Christ within us; that God, in Christ, through His Spirit is present with each one of us—guiding, protecting, comforting, empowering, and saving.

¹ The cloud by day is simply the "smoke" from the "flaming fire" that's visible by night. The cloud veils the fire and the fire inhabits the cloud.

² There were not two pillars (one of cloud and one of fire) but one. At night the fire shone in the midst of the cloud, while during the day it was the cloud (or the smoke enveloping the fire) that was visible to the people. In Exodus 14:19-20 it's the cloud (with the fire in its midst) that gives light at night, and in Exodus 14:24 we're told that Yahweh looked down on the camp of the Egyptians "through the pillar of fire and cloud." The cloud veils the fire and the fire inhabits the cloud.

Conclusion

“And when the day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a gale force rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues like fire dividing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit...”

What does this mean? It means that the time on God’s redemptive calendar has been “filled up”; it means that the age of the risen Messiah and therefore of His life-giving Spirit is here (already/not yet).

The question we have to ask ourselves, then, is this: Am *I* raised from death to life through personal faith and trust in Jesus? Is the Spirit of the risen Christ now alive in *me*? Through faith in Christ have I been filled with the Spirit of Christ so that I live, now, to God? John writes in his Gospel:

- John 7:37–39 — Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.’” But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were going to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

But now we know that the Spirit *has* been given because Jesus *has* been glorified. Have you believed in Him? Are you, even now, believing in Him, so that it’s no longer you who live, but Christ—the Messiah—living in you (cf. Gal. 2:20)?