

January 14, 2024

**The Acts of the Apostles**  
**II. Filled with the Holy Spirit**  
**Acts 2:1-14**

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It was exactly what Jesus had told them would happen – and yet, at the same time, it was so much more. Before He had ascended, Jesus had said to His disciples, “*You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.*”<sup>1</sup> So the disciples must have known this moment was coming. But they couldn’t possibly have known how awesome, awe-filled, the coming of the Holy Spirit would be. We hear that awe in the fact that Luke is grasping after words to describe what it was like. Notice how tentative his description actually is: “*a sound like a mighty rushing wind*” – it wasn’t exactly a rushing wind, but it sounded a lot like one. And then: “*tongues as of fire appeared to them*” – not exactly tongues of fire, but something which he can only best describe in that way. In fact, the only thing Luke can say definitively about that experience was that the end result was just as Jesus had foretold it – after the sound like a mighty wind and the tongues as of flame had appeared, from that moment on the disciples were indeed “*filled with the Holy Spirit.*”

“*Filled with the Holy Spirit*” – that is such an evocative phrase: “*Filled with the Holy Spirit.*” What does it mean to be “filled with the Holy Spirit”? The first meaning the Pentecost story suggests is the simplest and most important. Jesus had also told His disciples before He ascended into heaven that He would “*be with them always.*”<sup>2</sup> But how could this happen, exactly – since Jesus had been taken away from them up into the clouds? The answer, obviously, is the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is how Jesus is with us always. The Holy Spirit is how God gets into us – and, in so doing, brings us to God. If we are Christians, therefore, it is because the Holy Spirit came to us, filled us, and so – presence of Christ with us always – stirred our hearts and minds towards Christ, towards faith, towards salvation.

Now, there are some Christians who claim that the Holy Spirit is an extra gift only some Christians get and only after they have first become Christians – which results in speaking in tongues and all of that. They’re wrong. If you are a Christian, you not only already have the Holy Spirit filling you – but the Holy Spirit filling you is how faith came alive in you in the first place. “*Filled with the Holy Spirit*” – it’s how Jesus gets to us, abides with us, remains with us always and in every moment. But it is also how Jesus gets us to faith, to salvation, to a life lived in and for Jesus Christ. And sometimes this happens dramatically, as with the Apostles on the day of Pentecost. But just as often, in fact probably far more often, the Holy Spirit goes about this work of converting us to faith more quietly, behind the scenes, slowly and steadfastly opening up faith within us.

Think of Paul on the road to Damascus, struck down by a blinding vision of Jesus and converted to faith on the spot – sometimes the Holy Spirit gets us to faith with that kind of dramatic intensity.<sup>3</sup> But think also of Timothy. Paul describes Timothy’s coming to faith as arising from out of his Christian upbringing, as a child and youth in a deeply Christian home – something which unfolded slowly, quietly, over time.<sup>4</sup> But which is, nonetheless, every bit as real a coming to faith, every bit as powerful a conversion to Christ, as Paul’s dramatic conversion. One way of coming to Christ is not better than the other – because it is the Holy Spirit, filling us, which is at work in both. One way of coming to Christ is not better than the other – so don’t be ashamed if you have no dramatic story to tell, and don’t get too puffed up with yourself if you do. Because they are both manifestations of the Holy Spirit filling us – filling us and so bringing forth faith from within us. If you are a Christian, it is solely because of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit filling your life, your heart, your mind, even your body – and so bringing Christ to you and bringing you to Christ.

*“Filled with the Holy Spirit.”* Our Pentecost story offers a second meaning of what it is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Going back to the Ascension story – when Jesus told the disciples before His ascension that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit after He was gone, He added something else to that promise: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”*<sup>5</sup> You will receive power – to be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be empowered by God.

But empowered to do what? Jesus specifically said the disciples would receive power to be His witnesses *“in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*<sup>6</sup> And certainly that is what we see happening immediately after the disciples receive the Holy Spirit on that Pentecost day. Some of the crowd calls out that the disciples must have been drinking since sun-up, given the way they are acting. But Peter – remember cowardly Peter running away after he had denied even knowing Jesus three times?<sup>7</sup> – Peter stands up and begins to preach the Gospel to the crowd, to preach to the same hostile crowd which had called for Jesus’ crucifixion just a few weeks before. So power, yes – the Holy Spirit filling the disciples enables them to have the power required to be Christ’s witnesses, even in a hostile world. And so also the Holy Spirit filling us enables us to have the power to do not just that in our own age – be witnesses to Christ, but to be able to do all the other things Christ has instructed us to do as well. The Holy Spirit filling us is what enables us to do all that Christ has commanded. Power!

Think of all the things Christ has commanded us to do – love our enemies, seek first His Kingdom, don’t be anxious, provide for the needs of others, and on and on the list goes. If Christ had commanded us to do these things, but then left us all on our own to try to do them – it would not only be futile, but actually kind of cruel. Cruel to command us to do what we have not the innate power, much less sufficient motivation to do on our own. But Jesus is not cruel, ever. And so Jesus did not leave us without sufficient power, without sufficient help and motivation. He fills us with the Holy Spirit – and so gives us the power sufficient for the task He lays before us. *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you . . .”* Through the Holy Spirit, we have the power to do as Christ commands.

For example, one of the hardest things Jesus commands us to do is to forgive one another as God has forgiven us. He even put that one in the prayer He taught us: *“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”*<sup>8</sup> But forgiving those who hurt us, wrong us, can be so very, very hard

– nearly impossible for us on our own. But, having filled us with the Holy Spirit, Jesus has already given us the power we require to do even this.

I was reading last week this incredible story of forgiveness on the part of a mother whose son had been murdered in a case of mistaken identity. In other words, the murderer not only killed her son, but killed an innocent man who had done nothing to the murderer. To make a long, but beautiful story short, Dianne – that is the mother’s name – in the months of grief which followed, tried first simply to comprehend why God had allowed this to happen. But no easy answers came – they usually don’t. So, in time, that question faded, and another took its place (that fact, alone, is evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit’s power in her to help her deal with her grief). She began to ask, “*God, what can you do to both glorify yourself and to heal others through this horrible situation?*” And the answer to her prayer came back: that she was to forgive the one who had taken the life of her son.

She raged against that command to forgive for a long time – she told God how unfair it was to expect this of her. But God would not let her off the hook. Every time she opened the Bible, it was like forgiveness was just everywhere she looked – especially God’s forgiveness towards her, towards us all. Paul’s letter to the Colossians, in particular, spoke to her. Chapter two, verses 13-14: “*For you were dead in your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ’s cross.*” And then this following in Colossians 3:12-13: “*And so, as those who have been chosen by God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you forgive one another.*” So Dianne knew she had to forgive this man who had killed her son – but how to be able to do so. To do so truly and from the heart?

Here is her testimony:

*But for me, the most powerful aspect of forgiveness was the realization that I must choose, by the power of the Holy Spirit (!!!), to live with the consequences of another person’s sin. This is what Christ did for me on the cross. It is what God teaches me to do towards others. It is “forgiving as God, in Christ, has forgiven me”*

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*So, with a prayer that God would make me “willing,” I chose to show mercy and to forgive the murderer of my child. It was not always easy, but God gave me the power to obey His command.*

*It began with me writing simple letters expressing my forgiveness and explaining that he could be completely forgiven by God also. Over time, God showed me how simple “acts of forgiveness” would bless this man, and would increase my freedom from anger and bitterness. I realized the murderer and I were both on a pilgrimage of mercy.*

*The initial “act of forgiveness” was to pray for my son’s murderer by name. I had never uttered his name because he had become a monster in my mind. But when I started praying for Mike, he became a man, one whom God loved and for whom Christ died. Eventually, when [Mike] responded to God’s offer of mercy and forgiveness, [he] became my brother in Christ.*

*We worked to have him released from prison. And, as impossible as it sounds, I can honestly say, I love the murderer of my child. This is only through the mercy and love of God.<sup>9</sup>*

And the power of the Holy Spirit within her.

To be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be filled with the power to do what Jesus calls us to do. That does not mean it will always be easy – so much of what Christ asks of us is, in fact, incredibly hard, and will turn our lives upside-down. To be filled with the Holy Spirit does not mean the Christian life will suddenly become a walk in the park – but what it most definitely does mean is that it will now be possible for us. Seriously possible. Because we have been given the very power of Christ within, through our being filled with the Holy Spirit, what Christ asks of us is now truly, genuinely possible.

*“Filled with the Holy Spirit.”* Our passage suggest one more meaning. When the crowd starts shouting that the disciples must be filled with alcohol, and Peter stands up to answer them, he begins by telling them that they are not filled with alcohol, but filled with what the prophet Joel had foretold:

*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,  
even on my male servants and female servants  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit . . .*

They were not filled with booze, says Peter, they were filled with something so much better: with the promised Holy Spirit of God. Which reminds us of something Paul wrote to the Ephesians, Ephesians 3:19 – that we are to be *“filled with all the fullness of God.”* And more specifically, what he writes in chapter 5, verses 18-19: *“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit . . .”*

What am I getting at here? What the Bible is telling us is that we human beings were meant to be filled – that our lives are empty clay vessels that can be filled with all sorts of things, and which must be filled with something. That God-shaped hole in the human heart as earlier evangelists have put it. And we, in life, try to fill that hole, that void, that empty vessel with all manner of things – money, social media, fit bodies and perfect homes, on and on the list goes. But that hole, that void, that empty vessel which is the human heart can only truly be said to be “filled,” to be made complete, to be “fulfilled” when it is filled with the one thing for which it was made,

the one thing our hearts were designed to contain: the Holy Spirit of God. To be filled with the Holy Spirit means, finally, simply this – in the words of St. Augustine: “*Restless are our hearts, O God, until they rest in Thee.*”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps we might also add, “Until Thou rests in us.” To be filled with the Holy Spirit is, at last, to be made fully human – fully filled into the person we were always meant to be. Or, at least, on our way to becoming that person.

John Wimberly, a Presbyterian pastor, describes his own experience of this, of the peace which comes only from being filled up by the Holy Spirit:

*As a young person, I was dead-certain that the results of my life were of my own making. I designed and created my life, I thought. However, as I grew in years, I began to grow in a realization that there is an independent force present, at work in my life. I began to sense that a Spirit other than my own was affecting everything that came into being in my life.*

And then he adds this:

*It is only when we admit, no, celebrate the fact that Someone Else is helping shape us, mold us that we can relax and enjoy the creative process which is life. It is only when we relish the unexpected results of our lives that we appreciate the role of the Holy Spirit in making us who we are.*<sup>11</sup>

To be filled with the Holy Spirit is to be and to become precisely the person God created us to be. It is to find and to know the peace that comes from being in the right place with God, with others, with our own self, and with the world. As the story of the Acts of the Apostles will show, this certainly was true of Peter and Paul, James and John, even of our author of Acts, Luke. And it certainly is true and shall be true of you and me – who are also, this day and always, filled with the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:5.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28:20.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 9:1-9.

<sup>4</sup> II Timothy 1:5.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 1:8.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 1:8.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 22:54-62.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 6:12.

<sup>9</sup> Dianne B. Collard, “When the Words Become True,” The Mockingbird, No. 23, p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Confessions, Book I, Chapter 1.

<sup>11</sup> John W. Wimberly, Jr., “The Divine Artist,” The Living Pulpit, Vol. 5, No. 1 (January-March, 1996), p. 43.