

Tongues of Fire and the Fullness of God

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon emphasizes the extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost for the purpose of world evangelization and the necessity of prayer for revival.

Duration: 40:52

Scripture: Psalm 85:6, Isaiah 64:1, Matthew 6:33, Luke 18:7, Acts 2:1-4, Acts 4:31, Ephesians 5:18

Topics: "Book Of Acts"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker argues that the promise of the Holy Spirit in Acts 1-8 is still valid and necessary until the Great Commission is completed. The speaker supports this argument by pointing to historical examples of breakthroughs in world evangelization that occurred through the extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The speaker also emphasizes that the power promised in Acts 1-8 is not ordinary power, but rather an extraordinary empowerment for the purpose of completing the Great Commission. The sermon concludes with a personal testimony of D.L. Moody, who experienced a powerful encounter with God that resulted in numerous conversions and a deep desire for more of God's power.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God is available at www.desiringgod.org. Acts 2, verses 1 to 13. When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians.

We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God. And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, What does this mean? But others mocking said, They are filled with new wine. In recent weeks, I've tried to develop an argument that has three premises and a conclusion.

Let me give them to you. The first premise of the argument is that the power which was promised in Acts 1, 8 and the power that was promised in Luke 24, 49, that was to come at Pentecost was an extraordinary power, not an ordinary power. It was a power from the Holy Spirit that went beyond the ordinary work of new birth and the ordinary work of sanctification.

It was beyond and extraordinary. And I think that can be shown by the language, for example, the term clothing with power, Luke 24, the spirits coming upon you in power. It can be shown by the effects of the power as you read the book of Acts and the stunning things that happened when it came.

And it can be shown by the fact that the disciples were already born again on Pentecost, as you can tell from Luke 10, 20 or John 15, 3 or other evidences in the gospel. So the first premise of my argument is the power promised in Acts 1, 8. Is extraordinary power, not ordinary power and ordinary power is awesome. It's an awesome thing to be born again.

It's an awesome thing to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. But this is more and different. Premise number two, the extraordinary power promised in Acts 1, 8 and Luke 24, 49, is promised in direct connection and for the purpose of completing the great commission, namely world evangelization.

You can see that real plane in Acts 1, 8, where it says you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses to the end of the earth. There's a clear connection between the extraordinary empowerment that comes with this experience and the finishing of the great commission to the ends of the earth. That's premise number two.

Premise number three, that great commission is not yet finished. Conclusion for therefore, the promise of the Holy Spirit in this extraordinary experience of power is not withdrawn nor invalid in any way until that task is done. Otherwise, I can make no sense out of Acts 1, 8, where we are given that promise for the finishing of the great commission and the same in Luke 24, 49.

Now, the lessons of history bear this out. If you study the history of the advance of the Christian church throughout the world in the last 2000 years, what you will find is that remarkable breakthroughs in world evangelization happen again and again owing to the unusual and extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit in seasons of mercy throughout the history of the church. It has not been a steady state advance of equal penetrations of dark places year in and year out.

That has not been the history of the church. The history of the church has been in fits and starts. There is a great outpouring.

There is a rising, awakening and quickening and empowering and then a great thrust of settling. Then it happens again and again. Listen to Jonathan Edwards, the great shepherd and watch keeper over the revival in the states of New England 200 years ago.

From the fall of man to our day, the work of redemption in its effect has mainly been carried on by remarkable. Now, that's his words for extraordinary by remarkable or extraordinary communications of the spirit of God. Though there is a more constant influence of God's spirit that always, to some degree,

attends his ordinances.

That's what I call two weeks ago. Steady state, regular, obedient, faithful Christianity. There is a constant influence of the spirit of God in the church doing his good work.

Nevertheless, the way in which the greatest things have been done toward carrying on this work always have been by remarkable effusions. That's his old fashioned word for outpourings, remarkable outpourings at special seasons of mercy. In other words, from time to time throughout the history of redemption, God has been pleased to pour out a fresh, new, uncustomary, dramatic effusion of his spirit.

We've called them revival. You know, I hope by this time you've been around Bethlehem long enough that revival is prostituted in its usage when it's put on a big sign outside that says revival April 12 to 14. Revival is the sovereign work of God falling when he pleases on a people to waken them from the dead and empower them for ministry.

You can't make it happen. You don't hold one or have one. It comes in his sovereign choice upon a church and a denomination and a land.

And it's been called revivals, it's been called great awakenings, it's been called reformation, but it's happened repeatedly in the history of the church as people have cried to the Lord, perhaps for generations, and then his Holy Spirit comes in unprecedented, extraordinary power for world evangelization and the transformation and awakening of the church. Now, Pentecost is the first great outpouring on the Christian church of the Holy Spirit for this purpose of world evangelization. And I believe it's our duty as Christians, in view of my argument at the beginning, that we pray that Jesus says, will not he vindicate his people speedily when they cry to him day and night like this widow who's being so mistreated by her accusers? Have we cried day and night is the question, if we wonder where revival is, is it our portion day and night to send up heart cries for God to rend the heavens and come down as at Pentecost and so empower us that we would transform the city and reach the twelve thousand unreached people groups? So now I come to our text, as you can tell, not in any kind of academic interest in some distant, unrepeatable event as though it were the birth of the church and nothing more.

I come with the persuasion that we have much to gain today in the widespread deadness in our own denomination and in the evangelical movement nationwide and worldwide. We have much to gain by taking heed to this passage this morning, and I'd like to begin with verse one. When the day of Pentecost had come and my first question is, why did the son of man, having ascended to the right hand of the father and received the blessing of the Holy Spirit, choose to pour it out on Pentecost? Why not the day before? Why not three weeks later, a month later, five days earlier? Why Pentecost? Is there a reason? I thought of two possible reasons.

Number one, Pentecost means 50th. It was the celebration of a feast of the Jews 50 days after Passover. It was one of the three feast days on which all of the men of Israel were required to show up by pilgrimage in Jerusalem.

And therefore, God knew, since he'd set it up this way, that there would be pilgrims from all over the known world gathered in Jerusalem on this day, as you can see here in the text. This was a great day because it was a day when a world evangelization had reversed itself for a moment, as it were, and all had come to Jerusalem. That's the first reason.

The second reason is almost the same. Pentecost, according to Exodus 23:16, was called the feast of harvest, the feast of harvest. And I believe that it has a symbolic significance, therefore.

That not only were people gathered in from the nations on this day to be present when the Holy Spirit poured himself out, but also there was intended to be a great harvest, because, as we saw under premise number two, the reason the Holy Spirit power is given in Acts one eight is that the gospel might reach all the nations and win a harvest. And that's precisely what happened on the day of Pentecost, isn't it? When it fell, Peter said, this is that which was spoken by Joel. Let me tell you what happened to Jesus and how he's pouring this out.

And they were cut to the heart and three thousand souls were harvested from death to life and from darkness into the kingdom of light. And therefore, I think the reason is that this is a beautifully symbolic feast day of harvest on which the peoples had gathered and the Holy Spirit came to demonstrate why he was coming in the first place, namely to gather a harvest from the nations. Pentecost was the perfect day.

It's a shame that today the term Pentecostal power has for many people become associated merely with speaking in tongues instead of with the harvest of world evangelization, which is what it's all about. I'm going to come back nearer the end and talk about speaking in tongues and what happened here, but I want to make sure that you see the main focused. This is a feast of harvest.

And on that day, the Holy Spirit was poured out as a spirit of blazing witness to the greatness of God with such power that three thousand people were brought from darkness and death into light and life. That's the essential meaning of Pentecost. That's Pentecostal power.

We'll come back and see how tongues was a subordinate and significant piece of the puzzle, but not the essence. Verse two. And suddenly a sound came from heaven.

I want you to focus on the word suddenly. Suddenly. A sound came from heaven, and the reason I want you to focus on this word is to stress and drive home in an unforgettable way that the Holy Spirit is sovereign and free.

He is never subordinate or submissive to anybody else's timing or technique as to how he should come and when he should come. He is free. And therefore, if he comes into your life, you market it will be sudden.

We are to bank on his daily indwelling presence with his which is precious. We are to live in that faith and be obedient. We are to pray day and night for the extraordinary outpouring in revival and awakening.

But we cannot make him come. We cannot dictate the timing of his coming. We cannot prescribe the way in which he will come.

He is God and he will come when he pleases. He will be nobody's bellhop, though he is a servant, though he carries our bags. He keeps his own hours.

He doesn't just show up in extraordinary power when you ring the appropriate bell. He's God and he comes suddenly. How many of you remember now the story of Dwight L. Moody, I wonder? It's not so long ago that most of you haven't heard of him anyway, the great American evangelist that had such a remarkably successful experience of leading thousands of people to the Lord.

Moody had a church in 1871 and there were two women in the church that lived under his ministry and watched him. And they began to detect that this man, according to his own testimony, was a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. And they began to pray for him, to use their words, that the Lord would give him the baptism of the Holy Spirit and a fire.

And they would sit down here on the front row and just bow their heads and pray while he was preaching. And it irritated him. He felt indicted by it.

And finally, the Lord humbled him and he began in September of 1871 to meet every Friday afternoon with these two women that God would give him extraordinary new power in his ministry. In November, November 24th of 1871, his church burned to the ground with about a third of Chicago. You remember the great Chicago fire back in 1871.

It was a great tragedy in many homes, Moody's own home and his church all burned down. And he went to New York in November of 1871 and began to walk the streets. The reason he went because there were some well-to-do friends there who he thought might help him rebuild his church.

And yet he knew he needed power more than he needed building. And he began to walk the streets at night and in the daytime saying, prepare me and baptize me, prepare me and baptize me. And then here's his description of what happened.

One day in the city of New York. Oh, what a day. I cannot describe it.

I seldom refer to it. It is almost too sacred an experience to name. I can only say that God revealed himself to me.

And I had such an experience of his love that I had to ask him to stay his hand. I went to preaching again. The sermons were not different.

I did not present any new truths, and yet hundreds were converted. I would not now be placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you should give me all the world. It would be small dust in the balance.

Now, Moody had prayed. Moody was an obedient pastor. Moody was a faithful pastor, a hard worker, a soul winner.

But he knew he needed more if the great needs of the 1870s were to be met and if the world was to be evangelized. And so he cried out for more. And it didn't happen for a long, long time.

And then it happened. And notice how it happened. It came suddenly on an unexpected street in New York, and it brought harvest.

I don't know that Moody ever spoke in tongues, but he brought in extraordinary harvest when it came. So we've seen two things. The extraordinary power of the Spirit is given for harvest and world evangelization, and it's given suddenly because the Holy Spirit is free and blows where he wills, when he wills.

And we can ask that he come, but we cannot dictate his way or his timing. Verse two and three, let's look at the wind and the fire. Suddenly, a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.

There appeared to them tongues of fire, tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. Now, I infer from this story that the Holy Spirit is free and able, according to his own good pleasure, when he pleases, to give seeable, hearable, touchable, feelable manifestations of his presence and power. He can do that when he wants to.

In the Old Testament, for example, the pillar of cloud by day, the pillar of fire by night, Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit came like a dove this time, not fire, not wind, a dove. It came upon the Lord Jesus. Chapter four of the book of Acts, no tongues, no fire, no wind, but the building shook.

Chapter four, verse thirty one, chapter six of Acts, no tongues, no fire, no shaking building, no wind, but the face of Stephen shown like an angel's face. Chapter sixteen, an earthquake. In other words, according to his sovereign, free, good pleasure, as he chooses, he may bless the presence and coming of his extraordinary power with various and sundry, perceivable manifestations, or he may not.

He is free to do as he pleases with any of those signs. And we may ask, why is it one way for some people and another way for another people? Why do some people have this tingling on their back and others, their hands get moist and others begin to shake and others cry uncontrollably and others lose weakness or get weakness in their knees and have to sit down or fall down and others have visions of various things. Why? And I believe the answer is that God is not fire.

The spirit is not fire. The spirit is not wind. The spirit is not noise.

The spirit is not shaking. The spirit is God and he will never bring his presence into such conformity and consistency to our experiences that we would ever fall into the trap of equating him and the experience thing. The Holy Spirit always is this way or the Holy Spirit always does this or you can get a handle on the Holy Spirit and you know he's there.

If you see that he never will allow that. And that's why he mixes it up and keeps us guessing all the time, right through the book of Acts. There's no consistency as to the form in which he comes in terms of perceivable manifestations.

And yet I want to affirm very strongly that he can. And he does today reveal his power in perceivable manifestations. For example, many of you have heard of the psychiatrist John White, who has written numerous helpful books that some of us have enjoyed.

Psychiatrist, missionary, author, pastor. In his book, *When the Spirit Comes with Power*, which I recommend very, very highly. In a varsity press, this is a story that he tells from his own experience.

On one occasion, it was as if it was as I was praying with the elders and deacons in my home. I had tried to teach them what worship was. We then turned to prayer, perhaps partly to be a model to them.

I began to express worship, conscious of the poverty of my words. Then, suddenly, I saw in front of me a column of flame about two feet in width. It seemed to arise from beneath the floor and to pass through the ceiling of the room.

I knew without being told, knew by some infallible kind of knowing that transcended the use of my intellect that I was in the presence of the God of holiness. In stunned amazement, I watched as a rising column of flames in our home, our living room. Went up while my brothers remained with their heads quietly bowed and their eyes closed, I felt that I was in the presence of reality and that my brothers were asleep.

For years afterwards, I never spoke of the incident. The others who were present could not have perceived the blend of stark terror and joy that threatened to sweep me away. How could I live and see what I saw? Garbled words of love and of worship tumbled out of my mouth as I struggled to hang on to my self-control.

I was no longer trying to worship. Worship was undoing me, pulling me apart. And to be pulled apart was both terrifying and full of glory.

Now, I believe that's what happened on the day of Pentecost when they saw fire on each of their heads and they heard this loud, violent, that's the word in Greek, violent wind. They were overwhelmed like John White was with a sense of the presence of God. A new, extraordinary sense of the presence of God.

Now, let me try to describe the difference between what I think the ordinary enjoyment of the presence of God and the extraordinary experience of the presence of God might be like. I can picture them at 830 that morning and they had gathered early, probably came together and said, let's meet early to pray today. Perhaps the Lord will do something on Pentecost, we don't know.

At 830, they were praying and somebody, while they were praying, began to recite Psalm 23. They were bowed in prayer. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for His namesake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. And they just paused right there and said, oh, we praise you that you are with us.

Thank you for the promise in Psalm 23, 4 that you're with us. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil because you are with us. You're with us and we praise you for your presence among us.

Now, every Christian should be able to enjoy God's presence through the promises of His word like that. And then something happened that bumped that experience of joyful, trusting presence of God up, way up. Namely, somebody opened his eyes and blinked and couldn't believe what he was seeing.

There was fire on top of Peter's head. And he elbowed this other person, he says, am I seeing things? And then it lighted on everybody's head in the room, fire. Something that looked like fire, at least, it says as a flame of fire.

And then this sound like a train coming through the house, they didn't know what trains were in those days. I hear a train because I said I was through an earthquake in Pasadena back in 1971. I thought a train was going under our house.

That's what it sounded like. So I can picture them hearing this roar filling the house and they didn't know where the house is going to explode. They didn't know whether they were going to catch fire.

And something happened called in verse four, the filling of the Holy Spirit. And out of their mouths began to tumble praises to the greatness of God. They began to praise the greatness of God and their deductive knowledge drawn from Psalm 23 was bumped up into experiential knowledge.

The certainty that flows from our confidence by the testimony of the spirit in the written word was bumped up to an experiential certainty that was absolutely beyond all question and everything. It's like they were they were empty or at least they had lots of gaps that needed to be filled up in the Holy Spirit started to rise and all these gaps that had doubts and timidities and uncertainties and insecurities just began to be filled up by the Holy Spirit until the thing just bubble over at their mouths. And they began to speak with fire and power the greatness of God.

Now, the reason I say that they were worshiping and praising God the way John White was is because of verse 11. I think verse 11 is one of the most important verses in this paragraph, if not the most important, because the people who were hearing them said, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God. Now, why were they talking about the mighty works of God? It's because when the Holy Spirit comes in power, when his presence is manifest in an extraordinary way and it begins to take out of you all uncertainties, all misgivings, all hesitancies, all timidities, all restraints and fill you up.

You know what it's filling you up with? God. The greatness of God is filling you. Notice it says in verse four, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues as the spirit gave them utterance.

Now, think about that. The Holy Spirit filling and giving them utterance. Now, here's my conclusion from that.

If the filling of the Holy Spirit gives them utterance and if the utterance, according to verse 11, is the greatnesses of God, then the filling of the Holy Spirit is being filled with the spirits experience of God. You get that when you are filled with the spirit, you are filled with the spirits experience and knowledge and feeling and perception and apprehension of God, the father and God, the son. You see, the Holy Spirit is God, and yet it is a person different from the father and the son.

And he is the person who mediates the love of the son to the father, the love of the father to the son. He is the infinite energy that beholds the panorama of each other's perfections and praises the son and praises the father in the fellowship of the Trinity forever and ever and ever. And when that spirit fills you, you then have the spirits experience of God, the father and the spirits experience of God, the son.

You begin to love the son with the love that the spirit has for the son. You begin to love the father with the love that the spirit has for the father. You begin to see glory the way the spirit sees glory.

And you know, don't you, from the Gospel of John that the task of the Holy Spirit is to glorify the son. And how does he do that? But by filling us and thus revealing to us his vision of the son, his vision of the father. And that's what was happening here.

It was the tongues were a kind of language that had to be there simply because it was harvest time. And you had a whole lot of different languages gathered there who, according to Psalm 96, need to hear the glory of God declared by the power of the Holy Spirit. And they couldn't hear it because they didn't speak Hebrew.

And therefore, in order to make plain the greatness of God, which is what the Holy Spirit is all about, to make plain the overflow of the greatness of God, which is what the baptism in the fullness of the spirit are all about. There had to be at that particular occasion a gift, a miraculous gift of 18 or 20 languages or more so that they could participate in what really counted, namely God in his power and his greatness

overflowing because of the fullness granted to these 120 or so disciples. The speaking in tongues has a very simple connection between what was needed at the moment and what was the intention of the gift.

The intention of the gift is for harvest, as we saw in the beginning, and the need was for many people from many languages to understand the greatness of God. That is the connection between lostness and harvest. And they couldn't understand.

And so at that particular moment, God demonstrated by his extraordinary power that he could bridge all missionary gaps. He can do it. And so one of the lessons is not merely that the fullness of the Holy Spirit is a harvest experience.

It's meant for gathering in people to the love of God. But it's also a demonstration that in the missionary enterprise, God will move whatever mountain needs to be moved to get it done. That's the other meaning.

If it takes the miracle of tongues, he'll use the miracle of tongues. If it takes an exorcism in an African community, he'll use an exorcism. If it takes some strange stopping of rain for two years in a community, he'll stop the rain.

He'll do whatever needs to be done to get the Great Commission finished. And the reason many of our prayers go aborting is because they're not in the service of harvesting. The reason we exist is to glorify the Lord by the spillover of the fullness of the spirit in the declaring of the greatnesses of God among people who don't yet regard him as great.

And God will begin to answer prayers in extraordinary ways when our heart burns for those people. Not just for our own kicks, but for those nations that did not get transformed on the day of Pentecost. Well, one last observation and we'll be done when you come to the end of this paragraph in verse 12, there's a division of the house and there always is a division of the house when revival comes.

Every time the Holy Spirit has been poured out on the church in history, the Christian community divides. I know it well from the 1730s and 40s and what happened in the community in Boston and Northampton. The church begins to divide into two kinds of people that are described here, and I just want to give it to us as a caution so that we'll all be in the one group and not in the other.

Verse 12, one group says, what does this mean? Now, I take that to be a good question, a legitimate question and a heartfelt, open minded question, because it's contrasted with mockers in the next verse. You see, verse 13. Verse 13 says others mocked, others leaped to a naturalistic conclusion, didn't they? They looked at this and they said, this cannot be of God.

They must be drunk. So you can imagine how much frenzy and excitement there must have been there to say, well, that's one possible naturalistic explanation of the coming of the Holy Spirit. They're drunk.

Now, that's the division of the house. Notice, I'm not saying the division is between skeptics and gullible people. There's a question here.

I'm saying the division is between skeptics who are so resistant to the work of the Holy Spirit that they mock it and they they they pour contempt upon it with all kinds of innuendos. But the other group is not a gullible group. They're not a group that jumps on every bandwagon that comes along in the American religious scene.

They're a group that watches the drops begin to fall. They've watched the emotional experiences. They watch the lives of the apostles and they ask, what is this? And then I believe they go home and ask God and they read their Bibles.

That's what Jonathan Edwards did. Jonathan Edwards was in the first category. He was an extremely thoughtful person.

He didn't buy everything that came with the Great Awakening. He had many things he wanted to correct in the revival. But Charles Chauncey at the First Congregational Church in Boston scoffed at the Great Awakening.

And wrote it off. And by the end of his life as a universalist, he was a unitarian and forsaken holy by the Holy Spirit. And I just long at Bethlehem that all of us would be in the right category.

Those who say, are there evidences that the Spirit is blowing in our land as I believe there are? Are there evidences that we may be on the brink of a Great Awakening? What is this? Is there a biblical way to discern the movement of God at this time? And not be among those who have a knee-jerk reaction and say, it is not of God. And I am just so thankful that as I've served over the 10 years here, my experience has been again and again and again, that as God has moved here, as God has been teaching us things, the people of Bethlehem are the Bereans of the church. They go home and they test all things and hold fast to that which is good.

Let's pray. Almighty God and Heavenly Father, we lift up our hearts again as we did in the first half of the service to simply say, we are eager to be effective in the cause of love. We want to see the nations reached.

We want to see those in bondage liberated. We want to see the lost gathered in. We want to see the doubting and discouraged given faith and hope.

We want to see the aimless given a purpose to live by. We want to see children protected and made whole in families. We want to see old people loved as they get old and middle people helped in their crises at midlife.

We want to see people who are distressed and discouraged and depressed and addicted made free. And we want to be used as a pillar and a light in Minneapolis and in the 12,000 unreached people groups of the world. And we know we just know we can't do it, not with any form of steady state Christianity as we have known it for all of my life.

Therefore, I long for revival. I long for a great awakening in Minneapolis and around the world. I long for reformation, both for individuals, for our conference and for Protestantism and Catholicism everywhere in the world so that people might see and know that you are Lord, the son of God and the king of the church and all the people said.

Amen. Radio broadcasts and much more all available to you at no charge. Our online store carries all of Pastor John's books, audio and video resources.

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