

Peter's Trumpets Message—on Pentecost

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Joel begins his second chapter by speaking of the Day of the Lord, and he ends it by speaking of the Millennium. God's people look forward to both occasions through the Day of Trumpets and the Feast of Tabernacles, respectively.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the day of the Lord is coming, for it is at hand: A day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, like the morning clouds spread over the mountains. . . .

And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions; and also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My spirit in those days. And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Joel 2:1-2, 28-32)

Joel is certainly speaking of the events immediately before the Millennium, the "blood and fire" of the day of God's wrath, followed by the widespread availability of His Holy Spirit as the Millennium starts. Why, then, does Peter relate Joel's words to Pentecost? As he says, "But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). Inebriation had nothing to do with it, the apostle asserts, as he begins his extended quotation of Joel 2:28-32, cited above.

Peter's comments are a "first" in several respects. They appear near the start of his very first sermon, of which there would be many more. They come in the very first sermon in the newly founded church of God, and there would be many, many more of these as well. In fact, they represent the very first time Old Testament scripture is quoted in a sermon by any apostle—ever.

For all that, however, this "first" is puzzling! What did Peter see in Joel's apocalyptic prophecy that made him think of Pentecost? Admittedly, Pentecost's "divided tongues, as of fire" (Acts 2:3) may have brought Joel's description of fire and smoke to his mind. And, yes, about fifty days earlier the sun had darkened, on the Passover afternoon of Christ's death. However, had the moon turned into blood then or on the day Peter preached? Where was the "blood and fire and pillars of smoke" of which Joel speaks? Perhaps most importantly, did God pour His Spirit "on all flesh" on Pentecost, AD 31? Why did God inspire Peter to quote Joel in this context?

The Pentecost Miracle

To understand why Peter connected the events on that Pentecost with Joel's prophecy, we will need to notice two things about the miracle of Pentecost: its *nature* and its *participants*.

The Miracle's Nature : The miracle temporarily "*healed*" the ailment God imposed at Babel. There, God divided the languages of mankind, inflicting on it an impediment to communication (see

Genesis 11:1-9). Suddenly, relationships became much more difficult to establish and maintain. Mankind scattered.

Communication is a two-way street, involving a *source* and a *receiver*. These are what we call the speaker and the hearer, respectively. By changing speaker and hearer, the miracle brought source and receiver together, where normally they would remain distant. The disciples spoke languages in which they were untutored. Members of their audience heard the disciples "speak in his own language" (Acts 2:6). Communication took place.

As miracles go, this is a "strange" one. It did not involve healing the blind, deaf, or lame *en masse*; it did not involve the wholesale casting out of demons. Compared to the plagues God sent on Egypt or to Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead, the Pentecost miracle was not dramatic. Nevertheless, we will see that it was significant.

The Miracle's Participants : *The miracle involved Jewish speakers of a substandard dialect and Gentile hearers from around the world.* The disciples were Galileans. By virtue of the distance separating them from Jerusalem, Galileans spoke a different dialect of Aramaic than that spoken in Jerusalem. Like many dialects, theirs was what linguists call a "shibboleth," a term they get from Judges 12:6. A shibboleth is a speech pattern that identifies the speaker's background. In the disciples' case, it marked them to be what the Jerusalem leadership considered uneducated and low class. As an analogy, one could compare the Galilean dialect to "cockney" English—also a shibboleth. The dons of Oxbridge look down on those who are "unfortunate" enough to speak cockney. That is how the effete Jewish elite in Jerusalem reacted to the Galilean dialect. Everyone who heard the disciples knew they were from Galilee. Their audience was dumbfounded that these untutored fellows could fluently speak other languages:

Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God. (Acts 2:7-11)

Notice that they mention "Jews *and* proselytes." The cosmopolitan audience was not composed merely of Jews who had traveled from abroad for the holy day, but also of *Gentiles* converted to Judaism—that is, proselytes. Unlike typical Jews today, pre-Diaspora Jews (before AD 70) were dedicated missionaries. Christ Himself refers to their evangelistic zeal: "You travel land and sea to win one proselyte" (Matthew 23:15). Over the years, the Jews—like evangelicals today—had carried their religion everywhere. Paul preached the gospel in synagogue after synagogue throughout the Roman Empire. There were synagogues in the Parthian Empire as well; Peter, when he served God in Babylon, certainly frequented them. Judaism had reached the Far East by Christ's time and perhaps the distant West as well.

Pentecost's was a miracle of *language*. It showed Peter what Pentecost was all about: God had enabled communication between Himself and mankind. He had made it possible to build a relationship between God and man and between man and man. Even if human civilization had reached the end of its rope—suffering the judgment of God, as Joel apocalyptically describes it—"whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21).

Most importantly, Peter understood that this new level of communication *included* the Gentiles. This is why Joel's words struck home to him on the Day of Pentecost. He knew that the word "whoever" included the Gentiles scattered about in the audience. He preached good news to them: They now had access to God's salvation.

Notice Peter's concluding comments to his sermon that day. In answer to the peoples' query, "What are we to do?" the apostle replies:

Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call. (Acts 2:38-39)

Gentiles, those "who are afar off," could be "among the remnant whom the Lord calls" (Joel 2:32).

Servants to the Gentiles

Joel 2:28-31 offers *hope* to the Gentiles. Joel was not alone in writing of that hope. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the coming of a "Servant" who will raise up the remnant of Israel and serve "as a light to the Gentiles . . . to the ends of the earth."

And now the Lord says, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel is gathered to Him (for I shall be glorious in the eyes of the Lord, and My God shall be My strength), indeed He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49:5-6)

The reference to Christ as God's Servant here is reminiscent of Acts 2:18 (and Joel 2:29), where God says He will pour out His Spirit "on My menservants and on My maidservants." Those in God's New Testament church act as God's servants, under Christ, the Head of the church, to preach the gospel "in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). Only about thirty verses later, in Matthew 24:45-51, Jesus again makes use of the servant metaphor, this time in the Parable of the Faithful and Evil Servants. The working servant is rewarded at Christ's return, but the evil one, convinced that "My master is delaying His coming," finds himself "cut . . . in two."

Christ's Ministry of Light

Centuries after Isaiah wrote those words of hope, another of God's servants speaks of Christ as a light to the Gentiles. Simeon, recognizing the infant Jesus as God's Anointed, exclaims:

Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel. (Luke 2:29-32)

Christ would eventually serve as a light to the Gentiles. While Simeon does not quote Isaiah directly, he was certainly familiar with Isaiah 49 as well as Isaiah 8 and 9.

In these two early chapters of Isaiah, the prophet also shows Christ as a light to the Gentiles. Lurking in them is the rhetoric of Joel—the darkness, the shadow of death, yet afterward, just as in Joel, hope shines through.

To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. . . . Then they will look to the earth, and see trouble and darkness, gloom and anguish; and they will be driven into darkness. Nevertheless the gloom will not be upon her who is distressed, as when at first He lightly esteemed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward more heavily oppressed her, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, in Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined. (Isaiah 8:20, 22; 9:1-2)

Isaiah wrote *after* the fall of Israel to Assyria. The Assyrians' attack on the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, in the northern part of Israel, came in two waves. The first "distress" resulted in the deportation of some Israelites. The second oppression was much heavier, resulting in the deportation of virtually everyone. Then, the Assyrians imported *Gentile* peoples to the area of Zebulun and Naphtali, the area of Galilee. Their descendants—the Samaritans—heavily populated Galilee in Christ's day.

Christ was reared in Galilee, where small enclaves of Jews lived among many Gentiles. Matthew, writing of the start of Christ's ministry, writes:

Now when Jesus heard that John [the Baptist] had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee. And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles; the people who sat in darkness saw a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. (Matthew 4:12-17)

It was in the *Gentile* area of Galilee—not in Jewish Jerusalem to the south—where Christ *began* His ministry of light. In Romans 11:11, Paul asserts that "salvation has come to the Gentiles." Peter, in citing Joel in his first sermon, understands the Gentiles to be *spiritually* "in the region and shadow of death," in deep darkness, with clouds obscuring their vision of God's salvation. He relates Joel to Pentecost because, on that day, God spread apart those clouds to allow the light of His salvation to reach the Gentiles, dispelling their gloom. What happened in Acts 2 gave the Gentiles the *hope* that they could build a relationship with the God of salvation. The hope of the Gentiles becomes the theme of the book of Acts, as seen, for example,

» in the preaching by Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8);

» in the work by Peter with Cornelius and his family (Acts 10); and

» in Paul's ministry to the Gentiles in every city he visited. God called Paul "to bear My name before Gentiles" (Acts 9:15). Chapters 11 through 28 of Acts relates how Paul did that.

Christ: the Hope of the Gentiles

As the passages in Isaiah (and elsewhere) indicate, God did not "remember" the Gentiles by way of afterthought. He planned to offer them salvation early on. How early? Genesis 12 records the call of Abraham (then Abram), and the first of God's many promises to him. God tells the patriarch,

Get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:1-3)

God remembers the Gentiles when He calls Abraham, promising that *every* nation, "all the families of the earth," will be blessed in the blessings of Abraham. Paul, "the apostle to the Gentiles" (Romans 11:13), carries the thought to its conclusion when he asserts that the line demarcating Jew and Gentile disappears in Christ: "[T]here is neither Jew nor Greek; . . . for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28-29).

It is no accident that the events of Pentecost, AD 31, introduce the book of Acts. God uses the linguistic miracle to indicate the broad-based *hope* the Gentiles now have in Christ. God had enabled a hitherto closed communication channel between God and man—as well as between man and man. The gulfs separating God and mankind—and man and man—were now bridgeable. "On earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14), of which the heavenly host had sung, was now attainable. God displayed His ability to reverse the effects of Babel.

Communication between God and mankind. Paul, writing to the Ephesian church, makes it clear that the hope promised in the Old Testament to the Gentiles came *with* Christ. The result is that they can become members of God's household—His Family.

Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ. . . . Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. . . . (Ephesians 2:11-13, 19)

Communication between man and man. Pentecost also teaches us about the power God gives us to bridge the gap between human beings. Individuals led by God's Spirit become related to each other by the fact that they "are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." Paul summarizes the relationship near the end of Romans. Notice, incidentally, that Paul refers here to Christ as a servant:

Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God. Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written: "For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, and sing to Your name." And again he says: "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people!" And

again: "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!" And again, Isaiah says: "There shall be a root of Jesse; and He shall rise to reign over the Gentiles, in Him the Gentiles shall hope." (Romans 15:7-12)

Christ *will* eventually "reign over the Gentiles." At that time, He will finish the work He started at Pentecost, complete the work that Pentecost merely presages. The prophet Zephaniah prophesies that God will eventually reverse the linguistically divisive effect of Babel: "I will restore to the peoples a pure language, that they may call on the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one accord" (Zephaniah 3:9).

Note the plural: peoples. To "all the families of the earth," God will open the channel of communication by which they, as Joel and Peter agree, may "call on the name of the Lord." Then, they will be, as at that time of Pentecost, AD 31, "with one accord" (see Acts 1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12).

Paul concludes in Romans 15:13: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." The miracle of that Pentecost day gives "whoever calls on the name of the Lord"—Gentile and Israelite alike—"joy and peace" because of the hope all share through God's Spirit.