

—The Message of Acts—

Lesson 4—Dawn of the Last Days

- I. Through His OT prophets God promised a coming day of *repair* when the virus of rebellion, decay, and futility caused by the sin of man would give way to *righteousness, reconciliation, and restoration*. And though this “end-time repair” would be incomparably greater than anything seen before, God’s earlier works of power and grace were models, patterns, previews, and prototypes by which the Israelites could see a silhouette of the great restoration to come. The coming day of salvation would bring *a new creation* (Isa 65.17-25), *a new exodus* (Isa 40.3-5), *a new day of judgment on God’s enemies* (Isa 66.14-15, 22-24; Mal 4.1-3), *a new gathering in of the nations to worship at a new temple in the city of God* (Isa 4.2-6; 25.6-9). In effect, the prophets said, “If you want to get a glimpse of what it’ll be like when God finally reverses the ravages of our rebellion, look at the patterns of His redemptive interventions in the past.”
- II. Repair in Two Steps
 - A. It can be difficult to see from the writings of the prophets (i.e. prophetic perspective), but the NT makes clear that the Lord’s repair work in the last days comes in two phases. The first phase (known as *the last days*) arrived with the coming of Jesus the Messiah. Through his life, death, resurrection, enthronement, and pouring of God’s Spirit on His church, *the last days* began.
 - B. The initial infection of the created order came in two phases. *First* came the death that separated Adam and Eve from their God on the day of their disobedience (Gen 2.17). *Then* this spiritual and relational death worked itself out in the death of their bodies, which returned to the dust (Gen 3.19).
 - C. Therefore the cure comes *first* to deal with the hidden, spiritual source of the decay, and our spiritual and relational alienation from our Creator and each other; *and then*, in the end, it’ll become visible in the reversal of the body’s death through resurrection. Thus, the eschatological salvation through the prophets has *already* come; but the promised climax of salvation has *not yet* come.
 1. This means we live in a constant tension of *already-not yet*, Rom 8.22-23. The presence of the Spirit in our lives is a first installment of the full restoration that awaits us when Christ returns. The whole is ours and our present experiences are guarantees that we’ll enjoy the fullness.
 2. But as long as we’re in this world in a body of death, this tension pervades the Christian life and experience. Despite our frustration that the Lord’s work of repair in and around us is not yet *finished*, we’re to be encouraged that it has *begun*, 2Cor 4.16-18.
 - D. Thus the believer lives *in two ages* between the resurrection and second coming of Christ. We’ve been exalted in and with Christ—in His resurrection—to live (in principle) in the age to come—what’s called *semi-realized eschatology*. The age to come has supreme dominion over the Christian’s life because (being *in Christ*) this is where he really lives, Rom 6.14. Yet, he also still lives—in tension—in this present evil age (*in* it, though not *of* it). He must then judge all things from the perspective of the age to come, to which he *belongs*, and not the present age in which he presently *lives*. In other words, for the Christian, the “rules” of the age to come are the “rules of engagement” for daily living.
 1. What happened to the church in and with Christ was so radical that not only our *interests* are in the age to come, but our very *lives* (for we are raised up *with Christ* and seated *with Him*). When Christ entered bodily into the age to come by rising from the dead and ascending into heaven, the Christian’s *center of gravity* shifted from the lower to the higher sphere of existence. Only our members are on earth (which we’re to be busy mortifying! Col 3.1-5); we belong to and are already with Christ in heaven.
 - E. This is the perspective of the Spirit’s presence in the church that emerges from the account of Pentecost (2.1-41) and the subsequent healing of the man in the temple courts (3.1-4.31). The *last days* have dawned and the church enjoys the first installment and preview of the peace, purity, love, and joy of the world to come. The kingdom has come. The power of resurrection and renewal is at work, in the Christian and in the church.

III. Pentecost: The Signs of the Spirit's Coming

- A. Wonder-signs of a new creation and covenant: the wind, the fire, the tongues. These signs are echoes of new beginnings in the OT, displaying: a new creation, a new exodus, a new revelation, and a new resurrection.
- B. The mighty breath/wind of God (ruach, pneuma). The sound of wind signaled the arrival of the Spirit, who makes the dead live, who creates anew. The “wind” was the breath of God breathed into the new community. Pentecost was a new creation, especially in view of Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones (Ezk 37).
- C. The purifying fire. These flames announced the glorious presence of God (*think*: God’s presence with Israel in the wilderness). Each believer was marked by a miniature “pillar of fire,” indicating that each was a temple in which God dwelt by His Spirit (1Cor 6.19; Eph 2.22; 1Pet 4.14).
- D. The tongues of the nations. These tongues *were not* mere ecstatic speech or an angelic language, but dialects recognized by their mother tongues by members of the crowd who’d come from the reaches of the Jewish Dispersion. They were languages, previously unknown by the speakers, but imparted supernaturally by the Spirit. It was the reversal of Babel as the gospel went out into all languages and representatives of Shem, Ham, and Japheth were present. Also, “it signified a new unity in the Spirit transcending racial, national, and linguistic barriers” (Stott). At Babel man vainly and proudly sought to reach heaven; but at Pentecost God efficaciously and graciously came to earth.
- E. There are at least three ways we may think of Pentecost (cf. John Stott, *Acts*)
 1. It was the final act of the saving ministry of Jesus before the Parousia (His return). He sent His Spirit to His people to constitute them His body and to work out *in* them what He had won *for* them. [*In this sense Pentecost is inseparable from and as unrepeatable as Christ’s birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and session. It’s directly linked to the once-for-all aspect of Christ’s ministry. It’s an unrepeatable event in the history of redemption in that what happened there happened once for all, for all the church, and therefore never needs repeating.]
 2. It brought to the apostles the equipment and enabling they needed for their special role, just as Christ had promised, Jn 14-16; cf. Lk 24.49; Acts 1.8
 3. It was the inauguration of the new era of the Spirit, in which we now live as the NT church. Although His equipping and inspiring of the apostles was unique, yet He still equips, fills, and leads every believer, Eph 2.22. Every Christian is a Spirit-filled believer—the mark of which is not speaking with new tongues, but love for God, the confession of Christ as Lord and Saviour, and a life in the pursuit of God-pleasing holiness.

IV. Peter’s sermon: The last days have come!

- A. Peter’s sermon reveals three important facts about the Spirit’s coming
 1. *The outpouring of the Spirit* means the last days have dawned
 - a) Where Joel said “after this” Peter says “in the last days,” and then “these days” (cf. 3.24). The phenomena of Pentecost reveal that the last days have come. *The age to come has—in some real, provisional, semi-realized manner—arrived*. While the final separation of wheat from chaff is still to come, the winnowing fork *is* in Christ’s hand.
 - b) And it’s His exaltation *as Lord* (cf. Phil 2.9-11) that intensifies the urgency of the summons to faith (Acts 17.30-31). It’s His initial sifting by the preaching of the gospel which guarantees that the final separation is hastening (2Cor 2.15-16; Rom 2.16).
 2. *The gift of tongues* signals the arrival of the universal gift of the Spirit of prophecy (cf. Joel 2)
 - a) What Moses longed for (Num 11.16-17) and Joel prophesied (Joel 2), Peter declared to have arrived. The Spirit fills and enables all the church to be witnesses of the good news of Jesus.
 - b) *This*, then, is one grand reason for Pentecost: to equip and enable the Christian church to be Christ’s witnesses in this world—to open our eyes to behold the Lord’s works, our ears to hear His Word, and our mouths to proclaim Christ as Lord and to call all men to seek their refuge in Him.

3. *The Spirit's role is to bear witness to Jesus*, drawing people to confess Him as Lord and Messiah.
 - a) The outpouring of the Spirit on the church was *the proof* that He'd taken His seat in glory at the Father's right hand and had received the Spirit in fullness for the sake of His church, who simultaneously and therefore received Him as well, Acts 2.32-33. Note the image of Ps 133.1-2: we are united with Christ and therefore enjoy the blessing He received on our behalf, namely, the Spirit's filling and fullness.
 - b) The Spirit's activity in the church is the sign of Christ's present power and glory, Acts 2.32-33.
- V. The lame man leaps: sign of final restoration
 - A. The physical healing of the lame man signals the arrival of the last days and provides a preview of the coming comprehensive restoration (cf. 3.20-21). "This miracle is a sign, given at the start of Jesus' *heavenly ministry*, to demonstrate how He has begun the healing (restoration, refreshing) of the cosmos by the power of His name in those who have faith. The strengthening of the lame man's ankles prefigures the renewal of the whole creation, Isa 35.3-6 (cp. with Lk 7.22: there the lame *walk*, now they *leap*).
- VI. The new creation amid the decay of the old
 - A. This brings us back to the tension that pervades the Christian's life here and now, the tension between *the already* and *the not yet* aspects of our salvation. The promised blessings of the covenant (Gen 12, 17) had begun with the sending of the Servant to Israel; but the *fullness* of the messianic restoration has not arrived. The seasons of refreshing and the time for restoring all things must await the return of Jesus from heaven (Acts 3.21). God patiently waits to set right all that's wrong in creation (Rom 8.23). This waiting is hard for those who long for it, but it's a time of great mercy as it holds open a door of repentance for His enemies (Rom 2.4; Acts 3.19, 26; Ps 2.10-12).