

Acts: The Power of the Spirit Pastor Mike Stern

Main idea: It takes the power of the Spirit to accomplish the work of God.

Purpose: To point people toward reliance on the Holy Spirit in daily living

Passage: Acts 2:1-13

Introduction

We're just getting started on our new series in the book of Acts called *On Mission*, where we're seeing how God worked through the Apostles and the early church to spread the gospel throughout the world...and things are already getting weird...Or maybe they were already weird last week because that's where we heard about Jesus floating up into the sky, but now we've got tongues of flames and the disciples speaking in different languages. It's weird enough that the people watching think that they're all drunk.

Well, today's an experiential Sunday, so I've talked with the Holy Spirit, and I think we'll be able to time the arrival of some flaming tongues here with the conclusion of the sermon...

If you're not overly familiar with the Bible, reading something like this can raise your eyebrows a bit. What does this mean? Did that really happen, or did it happen in that way? Why did it happen?

I want to try to address some of those questions, but I've also got to say, we had better get used to it in the book of Acts, because the activity and the power of the Holy Spirit is a main theme for Luke in telling the story of the early church. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus operated with the power of the Holy Spirit, and now that Jesus is gone, His Church will operate with the power of the Holy Spirit. So, we'll see again and again that the Holy Spirit is one of the main characters in the story that Luke is telling. It's not just something that happens on the side—He is central to the entire plot and narrative. And hopefully, He'll be central in our own lives as well.

Ultimately, what I think we'll see is that ***It takes the power of the Spirit to accomplish the work of God.*** That's true in the book of Acts through the church at large, and it's true for you and me in our daily lives. You and I can do all sorts of things. God has made us in pretty incredible ways. But the most important things that we can do are the things that God himself is calling us to do, and those are the things that require the Holy Spirit in order to actually do them.

Power of the Spirit

My family once bought two bottle rockets from OMSI. One of them worked beautifully, using compressed air to blast off and soar into the sky as rockets are meant to do. The other one has been broken for months. It won't hold the seal on the compressed air, and without the air, the rocket doesn't have the power to blast off, or it gets a little way up, but it's not able to do what it should be able to do.

There's a pretty big contrast between the two rockets. One does what the operator wants it to do, and the other (frustratingly) does not.

That same kind of contrast appears in the first couple chapters of Acts.

In chapter one, we see the disciples gathered in prayer, which is great. But then Peter begins to take action and makes a case, by quoting some Psalms, that Judas needs to be replaced and the way to do that is to essentially roll some dice, resulting in Matthias being chosen as the next Apostle.

That's Peter operating on his own, without the power of Spirit, trying to make things happen. You could look at the result and say, "Sure, that's fine." But the rocket didn't really lift off. Maybe it got a little way off the ground, but not far, because we never hear about Matthias again....ever. I'm sure he was a great guy, but he is in no way pivotal to the rest of the story.

Contrast that with chapter two, and we see that rocket take off. Jesus said, "*Wait for the Holy Spirit and he will give you power.*" Before the Spirit comes, the power isn't there. But when He arrives, He sends the rocket through the roof.

We're meant to see that contrast between actions taken before the Spirit and actions taken after the Spirit.

It takes the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish the work of God. What Peter was doing beforehand wasn't the work of God.

John talked about this last week, but I think it bears repeating. We believe that Jesus left His church with a mission to do. That's what we see in Acts 1:8 where Jesus says, "*you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" We're still called to be witnesses here in Portland, and Oregon, and maybe California is Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

But what we try to do on our own, apart from the power of the Holy Spirit won't actually accomplish the mission. We don't want to be a church that works out of its own wisdom, strength, and resources. The scary thing is that we can actually appear to be doing pretty well on our own. But I don't want to be a part of that. And my guess is you don't either.

What we do want is to daily rely on the Holy Spirit to empower us for the ministry that He's called us to do.

And that not just collectively for us as a church, but for each of you in your own lives. God has called you to be a part of His church, which means you're called to ministry and you're called to be a witness of Jesus. You and I are able to do all sorts of things, but *the most important are the things that God is calling us to, and those things need to be empowered by the Holy Spirit.*

Filling the Temple

Which means that we should have flaming tongues over our heads every day. Not exactly. God was doing something particular at that time. It was a special event in history that signaled a particular thing.

When God rescued His people from slavery in Egypt and brought them to Mt. Sinai, He gave them very specific instructions for how to build the Tabernacle, which was also called the Tent of Meeting (interesting side note: in the Septuagint, the earliest extant Greek translation of books from the Hebrew Bible, it's called the *Tent of Testimony or Witness*, a key word for us in the book of Acts). Anyway, when they finished constructing the Tabernacle, the Bible says that,

...the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle...(Exodus 40:34-35).

Elsewhere, that glory is described as a *pillar of fire*. It was the visible expression of the presence of God with His people.

Later, Solomon built a temple to replace the Tabernacle. He built a pretty fantastic temple, and when it was completed, he was praying to dedicate it, and then the Bible says,

...fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the Lord because the glory of the Lord filled it, (2 Chronicles 7:1-2).

Very similar language about the presence and power of God coming to His people.

Well, that temple was destroyed when Israel was conquered by its enemies, the Babylonians. When some of the Israelites came back from captivity, they built another, slightly less exciting temple. And when they finished, and offered their sacrifices and prayed in dedication to the temple, the Bible says.....nothing....no cloud, no fire, no power and presence of God....for hundreds of years....

At Pentecost, when it says that a violent wind filled the house and that flames came down and rested on the people, it means that God's presence and His power had finally returned to His temple—but not to the temple *building*. Instead, it's to the people themselves—the Church is now the place of the power and presence of God. And the Church is not the building, but the people themselves who are witnesses of Jesus. That's for you and me if you are a follower of Jesus. We now carry the presence and power of God in & among us.

God did something special at that time to signal the start of something new, but that doesn't mean it's going to look like that all the time.

The Personal Spirit

I don't know about you, but I want God to move in dramatic ways more often. That's something that we're going to wrestle with as we go through Acts because there are a lot of dramatic things that happen throughout the story as the gospel is moving outward to new people and the church is growing like Tom Cruise's net worth after Top Gun.

Sometimes the temptation is to try to control or manipulate what the Holy Spirit does or try to produce the same outcomes on our own without the power of the Spirit. We can't control the Holy Spirit though, and the Holy Spirit isn't someone to be manipulated.

I mentioned a few weeks ago that we've been watching a lot of Star Wars lately. We watched *Obi Wan*, which was a great series to see after rewatching episodes 1, 2, and 3. Then we watched episodes 4 and 5, and now we're on Episode 6.

In Star Wars, power comes through the Force. The Force is impersonal and it's controllable by people, particularly those with a high midichlorian count. (Anakin Skywalker has the highest known midichlorian count—unfortunately, he turns to the dark side...) The Force is really great for things like...

- making your lightsaber come back to you when your enemy knocks it away
- pulling vents off the walls so that you can hurl them through the air at your enemy
- extracting your crashed spaceship from a swamp
- and making you jump really high so you can escape danger

It does what the person wants it to do to essentially accomplish selfish aims. Not so with the Holy Spirit.

First of all, the Holy Spirit is personal—a distinct person in the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not Father, Son, and their elemental force. In scripture, the Spirit is described as a unique person of the Trinity and not just the agency of power for the Father and Son. As the Father is God, so the Son is God, so the Holy Spirit is God.

Because the Holy Spirit is God, we can't control or manipulate the Spirit. Instead, we have to submit to and trust the Spirit. I can't schedule the Holy Spirit to send us flaming tongues at the end of this sermon.

In contrast to the Force, the Holy Spirit is great for things like...

- testifying about Jesus
- allowing us to walk in righteousness
- advocating and praying for us
- leading us to truth
- convicting us of our sin
- forming our character to be like Jesus
- guiding us in our lives
- being the indwelling presence of God in our lives
- gifting and empowering the church for ministry

These are the things that God wants to do in our lives and through us to affect the world around us. But only the Spirit can do it. This is what it means to be filled with the Spirit. It takes the power of the Spirit to accomplish the work of God. So that means we need to recognize the work of the Spirit and the presence of the Spirit in our lives, and to daily be reliant on him.

Gifts of the Spirit

The last thing that I mentioned there on my list was that the Holy Spirit gifts and empowers the church for ministry. This passage in Acts may make you think about the gifts that the Spirit gives.

One of the key places to learn about the gifts that the Spirit gives is in 1 Corinthians 12-14. I encourage you to read through it if you're not familiar with it or if it's been a while. That's where Paul writes that, "*All [the gifts] are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.*" (1 Corinthians 12:11)

The Spirit of God gifts and equips us in the church as He desires for our common benefit. The gifts are given to individuals, but they are for the whole church. Sometimes we like the gifts that we get. Sometimes we like the gifts that other people get. Some of us look at Tom Brady and say, "*Why does he get all the talent and good looks?!*"

When I was a child, I loved getting gifts at Christmas. My Christmas gifts were just for me, though. The gifts of the Spirit are for the benefit of the whole church. Which (as a side note) means that you should be using them to benefit the church. So that means, when you get a nice gift, I benefit from it. My sister, on the other hand, was not going to share her new bomber jacket with me.

Some of the gifts that the Spirit gives are what we call the *sign gifts* or *miraculous gifts*. It's worth talking about that now, because we're going to see many instances of them in Acts. These are things like prophecy, miraculous healing, and speaking in tongues (which means speaking in another language). It's not exactly like what we see in Acts 2, where people understand what's being said. Again, what's happening there is a totally unique event. Paul says in 1 Corinthians that when someone speaks in tongues, nobody understands them but God; not even the person speaking. It's not a human language; some people say it's a heavenly language.

We call these the *sign gifts* because, just as the miracles of Jesus were a sign of Him being the promised Messiah and the Son of God, these gifts are a sign of the power and presence of God in the midst of the church through the Holy Spirit.

The sign gifts are always an interesting thing to talk about. They're something that intrigues us, but also something that we don't quite know what to do with. [Like a toddler sitting in grass for the first time.]

There tend to be two ways that we distort the idea of these gifts.

1. We consider the gifts to be something from Bible times that don't take place in our times
2. We view them as something super-spiritual—the next level in our relationship with God

The temptation to dismiss them is in large part because of our history since the Enlightenment. Our primary assumption in Western culture is to look toward natural law to be the determiner of reality. The miraculous is something outside of the natural law; therefore, the miraculous does not happen.

It's common even in the church to think this way because we're steeped in it within our culture. For the most part, we experience God as far away and view our lives as taking on a 'natural' course based on our surrounding environment and circumstances. We believe in God; we pray; we read the Bible. But we don't expect God to act in any dramatic way in our lives.

The assumption in the Bible, though, is that God does intervene in human history, disrupts natural law, and reveals Himself to people through signs and wonders. He doesn't always do that, and He doesn't always do it in the same way, but the Bible assumes that there is more to reality than natural law.

History tells us that as well. People have attested to the miraculous throughout the centuries, and hundreds of millions of people still do today. In Acts 2, the people said, "What does this mean?" It means that the Holy Spirit continues to work in the life of the church, pointing to Jesus.

This is particularly the case when you look outside of the western world, and see the activity of the Spirit more prominently. We may be tempted to think that's because we in the west are more educated and advanced, but that's a pretty ethnocentric view, and that's something that Pentecost and Acts teaches us—God is reaching beyond one culture, and no one culture has the corner on the truth. More likely, in the west, we don't experience the miraculous because we don't need God as much because we have plenty of resources at our disposal. Of course, we are desperately in need of God, but we don't rely on him desperately.

These gifts still exist today. The Holy Spirit is still gifting the church in all sorts of ways.

So, in one way we distort the idea of these gifts by thinking or believing that they don't actually happen. The other way is to think that they are for the super spiritual people. As in, they're a reward for being particularly holy.

The first thing to point out is that every follower of Jesus has the Holy Spirit in them. Peter says in Acts 2,

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2:38-39)

It's for everyone regardless of where you're from (we see that at Pentecost); and it's for everyone throughout the generations. When you believe, the Bible says that you're sealed with the Holy Spirit as a down-payment for the promises that God has in store for you.

The nature of the gifts that the Spirit gives beyond that is nothing but grace. In fact, that's what the word for *gift* means in the Bible. The word is χάρισμα, which is derived from the word χάρις, which means *grace*. The gifts are just that—they are a free gift; they are grace.

Why the Spirit gives some people a more dramatic experience and others not, we can't say, but He distributes to each as He determines. In talking about all of this, though, Paul

says that “*God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it,*” which means that the Spirit isn’t giving gifts based on merit or who’s greatest, but perhaps exactly the opposite.

Changed Character

In fact, Paul says something else in 1 Corinthians. He says there’s something more important than the sign gifts. He says, *if I speak in tongues, or prophesy, or even sacrifice greatly for others, but I don’t have love, then I am nothing and I’ve gained nothing.*

The Holy Spirit is more concerned with *who we are*, what your heart and your character is like, than He is about the things that you do. And just like everything else that God is accomplishing, it takes the power of the Spirit to change our hearts and to make us more like Jesus.

It takes the power of the Spirit, because *it can’t happen by us just following the rules.* In fact, you and I and the rest of humanity are generally pretty poor at just following rules. We need changed hearts.

In Jewish tradition, the Feast of Pentecost (or the Feast of Weeks) is associated with the people of Israel arriving at Mt. Sinai and receiving the law from God through Moses. They were supposed to come to Mt. Sinai to have a direct encounter with God and to be His people, but from the very beginning, they disobeyed God, and they asked Moses to represent them. The more laws that God gave the Israelites to live by, the more laws they failed to keep.

But God said there would be a day when He would write His law on the hearts of His people, and that His people would walk by the power of His Spirit, and that the Spirit would set them free from the law.

To be filled with the Spirit in one sense is to allow the Holy Spirit to change who you are. The starting point for this change comes first by giving us security. The Bible says that, *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.*” (Romans 8:16) When we have the security of knowing that we are attached to God as a child of God, we’re no longer operating from a place of fear, but a place of freedom.

Within that secure place of freedom as a child of God, the Holy Spirit then convicts us of sin and leads us to truth. He gives us that feeling of conviction and He brings to mind the scriptures that we’ve read—and in that moment, we can make a choice to live by the Spirit and to obey God. And because we have the power and presence of God with us, we will actually be able to do the things that God wants us to do.

Of course, we can also choose to ignore the Spirit. The Bible warns us to not grieve the Holy Spirit by treating each other poorly and being angry and hateful to one another. Instead, we are to have our minds on the things that the Spirit desires. This is a practice that we build up.

The more we make choices to ignore the Spirit and to gratify our own desires, the harder it becomes to hear the Spirit in our daily lives. That’s why the Bible says, “...*walk by the*

Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Each step that we take with the Spirit makes us more like Jesus in our character—and we exhibit the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

That’s being filled with the Spirit. Sometimes, maybe we get to experience a more dramatic filling of the Spirit. But the more important experience of the Spirit is to faithfully walk with the Spirit in life, allowing Him to change us while we remain a witness of Jesus.

If you want more of the Spirit in your life, then ask God for it. The Bible says to “*eagerly desire the things of the Spirit.*” Take time, eagerly asking God for more of the Spirit.

Consider what in your life is taking the place of the Spirit. The Bible says, “*don’t be filled with wine, but instead be filled with the Spirit.*” In what unhealthy ways are you coping with life rather than relying on the Spirit? Ask God for help in those areas.

What are you trying to do on your own and why? It takes the power of the Spirit to accomplish the work of God. If you feel like your rocket is just barely getting off the ground, let the Spirit remind you that you are a child of God, and let Him show you what is most important. He is there with you daily, offering more of Himself to you.