

Acts 2:1-4

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The Holy Spirit arrives as promised. With the sound of wind and the appearance of flaming tongues, the disciples are filled by the Spirit and speak languages they did not know beforehand.

Jesus has returned to heaven after resurrecting from the dead. He spent forty days appearing to His disciples and teaching them about the Kingdom of God. Before leaving earth, He instructed His followers to wait in Jerusalem where the Holy Spirit would come to help them (Acts 1:3-4). They obeyed, gathering in a room in the city, spending their time praying and waiting.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place, the upper room of a house in Jerusalem (Acts 1:13). Pentecost is a Jewish celebration that takes place fifty days after Passover. Pentecost is from the Greek “pentekostos,” meaning “fiftieth.” Pentecost is also called the "Feast of Harvest" or “Feast of Weeks.” It is a festival founded by God dating back to the Book of Deuteronomy, when He, as their Suzerain (Ruler), gave Moses commandments and laws for how Israel, God’s vassal, was to live in the Promised Land once they had conquered it.

It occurs at the end of the barley feast and the beginning of the wheat feast, right in the middle of these harvests. This festival traditionally is placed 50 days after the Israelites left Egypt, when Moses went up on Mount Sinai and brought down the law. So in the intertestamental period (the centuries between the Old Testament and New Testament, 400 BC—25 AD) the Jews also began celebrating Moses bringing God’s law down from the mountain at Pentecost. God uses this time to send down the Holy Spirit to the disciples, which changes the entire meaning of Pentecost for believers in Jesus. It is noteworthy that as the Jewish people are celebrating Moses bringing the Law down from the mountain where God was, God will now again visit His people by sending the Holy Spirit, who will write God’s law on the hearts of believers, as promised in Jeremiah 31:33.

The Holy Spirit arrives, just as promised. He comes in marvelous fashion: *And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. This sound came from heaven, from outside of the room and outside of the physical realm, and it was a noise like a violent rushing wind, like wind blowing in from a storm, such as a tornado or hurricane. It was such a significant sound that it filled the whole house where the 120 disciples were sitting (Acts 1:13,15).*

Following the *rushing wind* is a visible manifestation of the Spirit: *there appeared to the disciples tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of the disciples.* When it was said that Jesus would baptize His followers with fire (Matthew 3:11), there was a physical truth to this promise, flaming *tongues* that *rested on each one* of the men and women there. Thus, the disciples *were all filled with the Holy Spirit.* The first thing they did after this filling was that they *began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.*

The *other tongues* they spoke were real human languages. Luke attributes this power to *the Spirit who was giving them utterance*.

There are several images here ascribed to the Spirit. He arrives with the sound of a *rushing wind*, and the visible evidence of His arrival is that of *fire*.

During His ministry, Jesus compared those who are born of the Spirit to the wind blowing (John 3:8). We cannot predict if the wind will blow violently, or softly as a breeze. In the Old Testament, the word for “Spirit” also means “wind” or “breath” (“rûah”). In Ezekiel’s vision, God tells the prophet that He will bring life back into dead bones, “Thus says the Lord God to these bones, ‘Behold, I will cause breath [spirit] to enter you that you may come to life’” (Ezekiel 37:5). When Jesus was reunited with the disciples after His resurrection, He breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit” as a foreshadowing of the Spirit’s coming (John 20:22).

Thus breath and wind are consistently associated with the Holy Spirit throughout scripture, perhaps because of the untamed, overpowering, invisible attributes of wind. God can appear to humans in any form He wishes, and God chooses this manner for the Spirit to manifest.

God also favors using *fire* when He speaks to humans. The imagery of *fire—tongues as of fire—* is associated very often with God’s intervention in Scripture. God speaks to Moses for the first time in the wilderness through a bush caught on fire (Exodus 3:2-4). God led Israel through the desert in the form of a pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21-22). God is described as descending onto Mt. Sinai “in fire” when the Israelites are camped at its base, and Moses climbs up the mountain to receive the law from God (Exodus 19:18).

The writer of Hebrews describes God as “a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29). It is very clear that what was happening on Pentecost was God coming down into the midst of the disciples.

God made both wind and fire. He knows how humankind reacts to both. There is beauty and terror in both. Wind can soothe us or destroy us, it is a power beyond our control. Fire, large or small, captivates the human eye. It too can be a source of comfort, in a fireplace on a cold night, or it can be an unstoppable destructive force burning down all in its path. God uses these elements to make a point to us about His power, about who He is, since it is beyond our abilities to see or comprehend His true face (Exodus 33:20).

As a result of the Holy Spirit filling them, the disciples begin to speak in languages they did not know. The Spirit’s role is to teach and to help the disciples preach the gospel, and immediately upon His arrival He prompts them to do just that, but in languages that they did not formerly speak, so that people from all over the world could hear about Jesus Christ.

This event is strikingly similar to God’s arrival on Mt. Sinai, but the outcome is different. In Exodus 19:18, God comes down from Heaven to make a covenant with Israel, “Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the entire mountain quaked violently.” The fiery presence of God on the mountain is terrifying to the Israelites. When He speaks to the people of Israel, they fear that

they will die, "Now then why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer, then we will die" (Deuteronomy 5:25). They beg Moses to intercede for them by talking with God alone. They could not bear to hear His voice. Thus Moses went up to the mountain and then brought down the Law of God to the people.

Now thousands of years later, at Pentecost, the Jewish people are celebrating Moses bringing the Law down from the fiery mountain. And God again descends upon His people with displays of fire and sounds of storms. But this time He speaks through His people. They will bring the law of faith in Jesus to the rest of the world (Romans 3:27).

Biblical Text

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