

Acts 2:5-13

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Jewish pilgrims and immigrants from all over the Roman Empire have come to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. They hear the disciples speaking about God's deeds in the native languages of the foreign places where they were from. Some believe the disciples are drunk, others want to understand what is happening.

The Holy Spirit has arrived. The disciples waited in a room in Jerusalem as Jesus instructed them, and with a loud sound of wind there came fiery tongues on each believer. They all began speaking in different languages through the power of the Spirit.

Since it was Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, the Jewish people had traveled to their sacred city to celebrate. Luke explains that *there were Jews living in Jerusalem*, who had made pilgrimage there for the festival. These were *devout men from every nation under heaven*. At this point in history, the *Jews* lived all over the Middle East and Western world. Dating back to the Babylonian Exile, Jews were scattered from their homeland. Since then they had continued to spread and settle in other areas such as Greece, Egypt, and Rome, in what is known as the “diaspora” (Greek for “dispersion”). During the Roman Empire’s rule, the many Jews who settled in other countries still clung to their national and religious identity. Thus, they would return to *Jerusalem* to observe their holy days and feasts.

The city is packed full with travelers and permanent residents. So *when this sound occurred the crowd came together*. The *sound* was either the sound of the Spirit, “a violent rushing wind” (Acts 2:2) or the noise of the 120 disciples speaking all at once, or both. The followers of Jesus were gathered in one place in an upper room when the Spirit arrived, and it appears they went out into the street and began speaking. The *crowd* of visiting Jews *came together* to find the source of all the noise. They encounter the 120 disciples speaking in many different languages and *were bewildered*. What *bewildered* these Jews who had come from all over the known world was that *each one of them was hearing the disciples speak in his own language*. This was a truly bizarre moment, which *amazed and astonished* the crowd.

They wondered to one another, *Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans?*

The Jewish pilgrims and locals were able to identify that the speakers were *Galileans*, from Galilee, the northern region of Israel where Jesus had spent most of His ministry. Most of the twelve apostles were from the Galilean region. It was apparently easy to identify Galileans, perhaps due to their accent. When Jesus was arrested, one of the bystanders hears Peter’s voice and recognizes he belongs to the Galilean followers of Jesus, “Surely you too are one of them; for even the way you talk gives you away” (Matthew 26:73). Acts 4:13 describes how the religious leaders in Jerusalem are able to tell that Peter and John are uneducated and untrained men.

It is understood that there was a social bias toward Galileans. They were considered to be uncultured. The way Galileans talked has been described such that they swallowed their syllables and wouldn't pronounce guttural words in the conventional way.

Galileans were not known for speaking in a beautiful way, or even a normal way. They sounded odd to other Jews. So the Jews who now hear them speaking in foreign tongues are thinking, "What is going on with these Galileans speaking these different languages? I thought they could barely master our own."

The crowd, which was made up of people from all across the Roman empire, question how they understand the Galileans at all: *And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?* It seems the Galileans who could not speak their own native language without accent were now speaking languages foreign to them with a perfect local accent.

Luke lists where the Jewish pilgrims and settlers were originally from:

–*Parthians, Medes, and Elamites*. These were Jews from kingdoms and provinces in modern-day Iran, a thousand miles east of Israel. Parthia resisted the Romans and thus was not a part of its empire. Elam (or Elymais) was a vassal to the Parthian Empire, while Media was a Parthian province.

–There were Jewish *residents of Mesopotamia*, a region roughly between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, now modern-day Iraq and Kuwait. In Mesopotamia was Babylon, the great ancient city where the prophet Daniel was taken as a captive. The Jews living there probably descended from the original exiles during the Babylonian conquest of Israel 600 years before.

–Jews from *Judea* were the locals, those who lived in the Judean region or in Jerusalem itself. *Judea* was the southernmost region of Israel; above it was Samaria, and further north was Galilee.

–*Cappadocia* and *Pontus* were provinces in now modern-day Turkey, hundreds of miles to the north of Israel.

–*Asia* is not the Asian continent we know today; in the context of the Roman Empire it was a region northwest of Israel, west of *Cappadocia*, and is now a part of modern-day Turkey.

–*Phrygia* was a province which overlapped *Asia* and Galatia (the same Galatia where a church would be established, to which the Apostle Paul would write his letter, "Galatians"). Both *Asia* and *Phrygia* are also in modern-day Turkey. As is *Pamphylia*, a region to the south of Galatia and *Phrygia*.

–*Egypt* is the ancient land of the pyramids and pharaohs, where the people of Israel were delivered from slavery by God, which began His covenant with them as a nation. It lies southwest of Israel.

–There were Jews from *districts of Libya around Cyrene*. *Libya* endures to this day, a country due west of *Egypt*. *Cyrene* was a Greek city in the north of Libya, near the Mediterranean sea, well over 1000 miles from Jerusalem.

–There were *visitors from Rome*, the capital of the Roman empire. *Rome* is far to the west of Israel across the Mediterranean Sea. Luke mentions that *both Jews and proselytes* came from *Rome* for the festival. A *proselyte* is a convert, a person not born into the Jewish culture, who became Jewish by choice. Ruth in the Old Testament is an example of a proselyte.

–Lastly there were *Cretans*, people from the isle of Crete in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, and *Arabs* from Arabia, to the south and east of Israel, some of which is now modern-day Jordan.

All of these regions and provinces were a part of the Roman empire (except for Parthia, Media, and Elam). During this time, there was relative peace and stability across the empire. This passage demonstrates how far ranging the Jewish people were spread across the world, and how they were able to return to Jerusalem safely to immigrate as well as to celebrate Passover or the Feast of Weeks. And yet all these Jewish people and *proselytes* spoke various native languages from around the world. But the disciples of Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, spoke to every one of them in their *own tongues*, even in their local dialect.

The disciples were not idly chattering or showing off that they could speak Latin or Greek. They were, in these various languages, *speaking of the mighty deeds of God*. This was the point of the moment. To speak of God's *mighty deeds*, to make His name great to the *devout men* who were visiting Jerusalem. This is what Jesus had told the disciples to do before He departed to Heaven, to be His witnesses to the entire world. And the ministry of the church of Jesus starts off doing that right away, from one place.

This initial display is to Jews in Jerusalem who were *devout men*. The word translated *devout* appears only on three occasions in the New Testament. In Luke 2:25, Simeon is called *devout* and just. He was a man eagerly awaiting the advent of the Messiah. It is said the Holy Spirit was upon him. In Acts 8:2, it is said that devout men buried Stephen, who was the first known martyr of the church era, which began at Pentecost. So it seems likely that the term *devout men* referred to those who genuinely worshipped the true and living God.

Many of these Jews were likely transitory, they were not permanent residents of Jerusalem, and would go back to their own homes in their own nations. The word and glory of God were being preached to them to begin to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). Every one of these pilgrims would go back to their homes, whether they believed in Jesus or not, and tell their neighbors and friends of the amazing experience they had in Jerusalem. The good news of Jesus would spread from this event. The ministry of the Holy Spirit begins in an incredibly effective way, preaching the gospel all across the Roman world from day one of His arrival.

And the crowd all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" They sought to learn what was behind the miracle. They were in earnest to know more.

But among humankind there will always be cynics. There were *others* in the crowd *mocking and saying* of the disciples, “*They are full of sweet wine.*” They must be drunk. A crowd of multilingual Galileans simply had too much to drink and started preaching about God’s greatness. There are always skeptics who will reject God’s word, mocking and making fun of the work of the Spirit. Jesus cast out demons and was accused of being demon-possessed Himself, despite the logical contradiction (Luke 11:14-20). It is the nature of the human heart to resist the work of God, but we will see that many will respond to Peter’s invitation to believe.

In this event, there is a kind of reversal of what happened at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). The Tower of Babel was built by all the nations when there was only one language to speak and all men were united, but God split up the nations and made them speak different languages, so that they were disunited. But now through Pentecost, the Holy Spirit reverses that curse and brings the languages back together under the unity of the Spirit.

This act of the Holy Spirit transcends linguistic barriers. In this chapter, the message is only coming to the Jews in Jerusalem, but as the remainder of the book of Acts will show, it spreads to the nations, to the Gentiles. God’s message in this moment is clear that He is willing to come to all people personally and individually at their level to bring them the good news of His Son’s saving death and resurrection.

Biblical Text

5 Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6 And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. 7 They were amazed and astonished, saying, “Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.” 12 And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” 13 But others were mocking and saying, “They are full of sweet wine.”