

**5.23.2021**

**God is Powerful 5.23.2021 Acts 2:1-24**  
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This week's characteristic of God is that God is powerful. This is perhaps a more obvious characteristic of God than some other ones. After all what we usually mean by the word God, is an all-powerful being. Something with the power to create and order the universe. If something isn't powerful, it can't be much of a god. So the question for us today, is more in what way is God powerful? How does He use His power? Where can we see it? How should we respond to it? To answer these questions, we'll look at the story of Pentecost. Now this story comes after the resurrection of Jesus and after His ascension into heaven, when the apostles are waiting in Jerusalem, waiting for the Spirit of God to come to them as Jesus had promised. Listen to the story of Pentecost from Acts chapter two:

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another,

Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?

Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God. And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this?

Others mocking said, These men are full of new wine. But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them,

Ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words: For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day. But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel;

And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy: And I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke: The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and notable day of the Lord come: And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.

This story takes place 50 days after the resurrection, during the Jewish Festival of the Weeks, a holiday that comes seven weeks after the Passover. And for the holiday, Jews who lived all over the ancient world, the diaspora made the pilgrimage back to Judea and gathered in Jerusalem. The disciples are also gathered in Jerusalem and are waiting for the Spirit which Jesus had promised would come in Acts chapter 1 saying:

“Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”

At Pentecost that power, the Holy Spirit arrives, tongues of fire appear, the apostles speak and every man hears it in his own native language. And Peter preaches the good news of Jesus and his resurrection to everyone there. When he finishes preaching, three thousand people come to faith.

What a change. What a reversal from 50 days earlier, when Jesus had been rejected by the Jews, executed by the Romans, abandoned by his disciples, and he lay dead in his tomb. Pentecost turns everything that came before it upside down. God takes the human failures of the culture, the Israelites, the apostles, and uses these failures as opportunities to demonstrate his power. Let's look at those three things, the culture, the Israelites, and the apostles.

Up to this point in the Bible, differences in language and culture have been sources of division and conflict. God's chosen people spend most of the Old Testament fighting all their neighbors. And even when the Israelites aren't fighting other nations, those other nations are fighting each other. And in the gospels we see all the struggles between the Jews and their Roman rulers right up to the trilingual sign nailed to the top of the cross. Today, nothing has really changed.

It's been thousands of years and the same cities, the same problems are still in the news. Differences in language, in culture, in belief, lead to conflict and division. Always have, always will.

And that's the story of Babel which Susannah read for us earlier, that we humans were so proud we thought we could build a tower up to heaven, but God limited us and humbled us by dividing us into different nations and languages.

But Pentecost reverses Babel. Rather than people building a tower up to God, people have come to God up the mountain God chose, Mount Zion, Jerusalem. At Babel people are confounded (to use that good old King James word) by hearing all the languages they can't understand, but at Pentecost people are confounded by hearing so many languages they all do understand. While the people of Babel gave up on building their tower, the people of Pentecost go out to begin building the Church.

A gathering of people from all over the world, speaking different languages, practicing different cultures, should have been a disaster. It should have been like Babel. It should have been alienating and divisive and lonely and violent. It should have been a little like New York City. But that is why God chose it. Only God has the power to take a group like that and unite it and use it for good. As it says in Second Corinthians, God's strength is made perfect in weakness. Our weaknesses reveal God's strength.

Pentecost also reverses Babel not just through uniting people from different cultures, but through the nation of Israel. In Genesis, the story of Babel comes right before the story of Abraham. As soon as God scatters the nations for their pride, he picks one man in particular, Abraham, calls him to leave his home and promises to bless him. Abraham would be the father of the Jewish people and through that one particular people God planned to bless the world. God tries to solve the division of Babel, by working through one chosen people.

But the Bible tells us how Israel failed again and again in this calling, how they turned away to idols and served foreign kings and forgot God, especially at this point in the Bible's narrative here in Acts chapter two. Just a few weeks ago, they rejected Jesus, formed a mob, and demanded his crucifixion. And Peter reminds them of this in his preaching.

But now that the Holy Spirit has come, things change. The Israelites gathered in Jerusalem from all over the world, listen to Peter and obey him. They believe and are baptized. Three thousand join the faith. This is the beginning of the Church. From here the apostles and the new Christians begin to travel all over the world spreading the gospel. Some of the Israelites take up God's calling to bless the nations. They accept Jesus, who only a few weeks ago they had put to death.

After Babel the Israelites had been called out, separated from the rest of the world, when God chose Abraham and his descendants. But after Pentecost the believers, the Church, God's new chosen people, the new Israel is not called out but sent out, to share the good news with the rest of the world.

And who gets to lead this new Israel on its new mission? The apostles. And Pentecost is a reversal for the apostles too. Remember the apostles from the gospels? They were awful. Jesus spoke in parables and they never understood them. They're usually confused and rarely helpful. They ask stupid questions and bicker about who gets to sit where in heaven. They fail to perform miracles. They abandon Jesus in His hour of greatest need. A terrible team.

But God chose them to lead his Church. Peter, the same Peter who three times denied Jesus, is now filled with the Spirit and the power of God. Peter now praises God and preaches the gospel, bringing people to faith, calling them to repent and be baptized and to go out and tell others the good news.

And this is another reversal of Babel. Just as after Babel, the people scattered in their confusion away from the tower, in days after Pentecost, the people will scatter away from Jerusalem to the rest of the world, not in confusion though, but with a mission, sharing the good news just as Peter had done for them.

After all Pentecost is just the beginning, it's only the second chapter of Acts. Pentecost shows us how God founded the Church before sending it out on its mission. Pentecost shows us how God organized and created the institution that would fulfill his plan to bless and save the world. But, looking at God's plan here from a human perspective, all of God's choices for the Church in Acts two are terrible. They make no practical sense.

First, God chooses a group of people who are naturally divided by language and culture. This is not a good idea. As we saw at Babel, division prevents people from working together towards a common goal.

Second, God chooses the Jews to be the first to receive His latest call to repentance. The same people who had failed him over and over again in the Old Testament. The same people who had just rejected and killed Jesus.

Third, God chooses the Apostles to lead the Church. The apostles were probably mostly illiterate, mostly fishermen, all poor, all uneducated, entirely lacking in credentials and experience. And having been put to the test as followers of Christ, they had all failed repeatedly and decisively. Jesus spends more time praising the faith of centurions and tax collectors and prostitutes than praising the faith of his own disciples.

If I was founding an organization whose goal was to teach people how to live better, sort of like a school, and I hired a bunch of people who all spoke different languages so none of them could communicate with each other, hired people who I knew from an old job where they had always messed up and caused trouble, and then I put an illiterate fisherman in charge of the whole thing, no one would expect that organization to succeed. And it wouldn't.

But that is precisely what God does. God chooses the worst possible people for the job. God chooses people that shouldn't succeed, God chooses failures, because when they do succeed, we know it was God who did it. We know it was the power of God that did it. God uses our human weaknesses to show his power.

Over and over again in the Bible, we see God choosing someone naturally weak to show God's supernatural strength. God chooses Jacob, the younger weaker twin, over Esau. God chooses the Israelites, the slaves, over Pharaoh. God chooses David, the youngest son of Jesse, to be king and to defeat Goliath. And again in the New Testament, especially here at Pentecost, God chooses to found the Church on the powerless to demonstrate His power. When the powerless succeed we know it was God who did it.

And so going into Pentecost the people were divided and weak, but once the Holy Spirit, once the power of God arrives, everything changes. Peter becomes a brave leader. The Israelites become faithful. The divided people become united. Whatever weakness or flaws we have, God can use those to demonstrate his power.

And consider how the crowd in Jerusalem responds when they see all this, when they see people speaking in different languages but understanding each other, when they see the disciples of Jesus, who have been mostly hiding since Jesus was put to death, those same disciples running around preaching. Some of them the text says were amazed and confounded; they marvelled at it; they wanted to know what it meant. And the only explanation they have is this, these men are drunk. They're drunk. Perhaps that seems strange but they say the same thing about Jesus back in Matthew they call him a winebibber, a drunkard.

This part of the story has two lessons for us. First, that when God works in our lives, when God shows his power through our weakness, other people should notice it and be confused. The Holy Spirit working in us should be like steroids on an athlete. You look at some football players or you look at a Barry Bonds, you see the muscles bulging, and you know there's something unnatural there, something is happening. And I hope when you look around the Church, at the Christians you know, I hope you feel that way, that something is happening. We should be able to say to ourselves, if I had suffered everything she had suffered, I wouldn't be that cheerful. If I had as much money as he has, I wouldn't live so simply. If I had gone through what she went through, I wouldn't be able to forgive. We should look at each other's lives with a sense of wonder about what God is doing.

When I look around I have that feeling, I'm confounded when I see what some of you do, for instance that there are so many people in their 80s and even their 90s here still active and not just coming to church but volunteering and making all this possible. When I'm that old, sometime in the 2080s, I'll probably just be dead. So I marvel at it, I'm amazed. And that's what is says in Acts, they marvel, they're confounded, they're amazed; that's the response we should have to seeing the Spirit working in each other and the response non-Christians should have to seeing our lives.



The second thing we can learn from the people's response, from their asking if the apostles were drunk, is that actions aren't enough. Our actions alone, our lives alone aren't enough to show others the way to God. There's no way to tell the apostle Peter apart from a crazed drunk until he explains himself. There's no way to tell whether it's God or whether it's something we drank gladdening our heart until we open our mouth and speak.

Sometimes we can think that if we just live the right way, other people will magically become Christians or we think that if people don't come to Jesus it's because we as Christians aren't being Christlike enough. But the fact is, Jesus was as Christlike as you can be, and he didn't win a lot of converts for it. He was despised and rejected for it. He was killed by an angry mob.

It isn't enough for Peter to perform the miracle of speaking in a language he had never learned. He needs to say how he got that power and we do too. If the Spirit is working in us, we should tell people. Listen to what Peter says. First he denies being drunk, since it was after all, much too early in the morning. Then he quotes the prophet Joel who foretold of a day when the Spirit would be poured out as it was on Pentecost. Then he says:

Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.

That's the gospel, that Jesus performed miracles, was perfect, was sent by God, and we killed Him, but God brought Him back to life. As it says in Philipians Jesus "made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

Jesus humbled Himself by becoming human, embracing all the weaknesses that come with being human. Hebrews tells us He was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. When He fasted, He was hungry. When His friend died, He wept. When He was whipped, he bled. And then Jesus humbled Himself to the ultimate and final human weakness, death.

No matter how strong or vital or healthy or rich or powerful or loved or popular we are, we all face death. We will all reach a time when all those strengths fade away and we become so weak that we can do nothing, that we are nothing.

But God uses human weaknesses to show His power. If we believe in Jesus, He will use our deaths to show His power. We will be raised to life. As Peter says, it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved. God has loosed the pains of death. God has raised Him up. It was not possible that death should hold Him.

This is power and the promise of God, that He is the resurrection and the life, that if we believe in Him, God will save us. God has that power. Although we're flawed, we're mortal, we're sinful, all those weaknesses are how God shows his power. God wants to turn those weaknesses into strengths; God wants to give us His power. All we have to do is ask.

Let's pray.