

## The Blessing of Babel

### Acts 2

The Hebrew word “balal” means “confuse”. The word “babhel” means “gate of God”. The word “babel” means “there is confusion”. All this is to say that there is a heavy pun and depth of meaning in the story of the Tower of Babel. The words for “God’s gate” and “confusion” are pronounced similarly.

The tower erected by man in Genesis 11 was their own “babhel”, their gateway to God or heaven. God judged it with “balal”, a confusion of languages. It became known as the Tower of “Babel”, because there was confusion. That historic event was a profound judgment of God upon the human race. By way of contrast, the historic event on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 was a profound blessing on the human race, with no less use of puns and ironies.

### I. The 50 Day Celebration

According to I Howard Marshall, the day of Pentecost was celebrated in 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Judaism as the date that the Law was given to Moses at Mount Sinai. He continues with an interesting observation saying “...there was a rabbinic tradition that the law was promulgated by God in the languages of the seventy nations of the world, but we cannot be certain that this tradition was current in the first century.” This tradition does not come from the Bible, but it is an interesting comparison with the event of Act 2, when the New Covenant empowerment came with the blessing of many languages.

First, notice the play on the word “full” or “filled” in Acts 2:1-4. The Day of Pentecost had “fully come” (v.1). The house where they were staying was “filled” with the rushing mighty wind (v.2). The Apostles were all “filled with the Holy Spirit” (v.4). This is a fulfilling of days, dwelling, and persons. Also, Pentecost itself is fulfillment type of festival. It was the concluding grain harvest festival in the Old Testament (Lev.23:15-22). They were to bring a new grain offering to the priest on the Day of Pentecost. It marked the time when grain was harvested and threshed. It was a harvest-fulfillment festival. So then, Acts 2:1-4 is saturated with the theme of being full. And just as Jesus was full of grace and truth; even so the coming of His Spirit is full of salvation and judgment.

### II. The Coming of The Lord

In this passage the Lord comes in the Person of His Spirit, symbolized by the “rushing mighty wind” and the “tongues, as of fire”. Fire and wind signify the presence of God, and when God appears it is the time of inspection which yields to a blessing or curse. We see this in the Garden of Eden.

Adam and Eve “heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the spirit (or wind) of the day...” Whichever word we prefer to use, wind or spirit, it is more accurate than “cool of the day”. The wind or spirit mentioned in Genesis 3:8 was not simply the morning breeze. When God shows up on the scene, it is not a gentle breeze. It is a mighty rushing wind (Acts 2), a cloud of glory with tremendous lighting (Ex.19), a loud chariot with strange cherubim— all energized by the Spirit of God (Ez.1), or as a fiery chariot with a whirlwind (II Kgs.2:11). For Adam the first Lord’s Day was the first time of inspection, and the time when God was to be honored. For this reason it is plausible that Genesis 2 focuses on Day 6 of creation, and Genesis 3 focuses on Day 7 of

creation. On the day that God rested from His work, He showed up in the wind of the day to inspect Adam's work. And just as notorious apostates always emerge right after magnificent biblical events, Adam quickly went after Satan and failed God's inspection soon after he was created.

Likewise, God is showing up, in the Spirit, on the Day of Pentecost. He has come to inspect, to fill, to bless, and to judge. First we see that the Apostles, and the 120 with them, have passed God's inspection. They have a completed 12-fold Apostolic foundation (Acts 1:15-26), which is rooted and ground in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. They are the foundation of God's Apostolic kingdom, the new house in which God will dwell with His people. God has come to fill this new house with His Spirit, and inaugurate His great building project for the rest of time. Contrary to the First Adam, this new humanity united to the Second Adam receives a blessing from God's inspection: the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Also contrary to the Tower of Babel event, God does not curse but blesses them with the gift of tongues. Ironically the tongues are "divided" as they sat on each of them, yet in that division there was a union in that people "from every nation under heaven" could hear the gospel message.

There are seven statements in verses 1-3, each beginning with the conjunction word "kai", meaning "and". On the "Background" page you can see how these statements are structured. A different conjunction, "de", is used to begin and end the next section of 5 – 13. This change of conjunction helps to point out a change of subject in the next section.

## II. The Reaction to the Lord's Work

Again there is much irony in this section (5-13) as well. People from "every nation under heaven" are there, and now God has showed up to all of them! When God showed up in the Tower of Babel it was a judgment on the entire world. Not that the entire world was there but the priestly people (Shemites) had apostatized to build the Tower. What happened to the priestly people flowed downhill, so to speak, affecting the rest of humanity. Likewise, the Apostles were the new priestly people of the world. Now God will bless every nation under heaven through the Apostles.

First, notice that this passage moves from the theme of devout Jewish men and ends with their mockery. The chiasmic structure on the "Background" page helps to point out that the passage moves from Devout Jews to Mocking Jews. Clearly, the "others mocking" were the once devout Jews in verse 5. This is a foretaste of things to come. Once godly devout Jews, if they reject the work of the Spirit of God, will no longer be considered godly or devout.

Also, notice that the list of nations begins in the far-east, encircles the Mediterranean Sea, ending with the Cretan island in the middle, and back again to the far-east region. Luke is encircling the Mediterranean Sea with his description, just as the converts and church planting work will encircle that same Sea later in Acts.

Clearly everyone understood what was being said. The Jews who mocked were rejecting a message they could understand. Ironically they mocked the Apostles saying they were "full of new wine". In one sense they were. It was the "new wine" the Spirit, the New Covenant power. Yet, these Jews were blinded to this truth. Another irony is that these devout men "were confused", even though they heard and understood the language that was spoken. That fact that many Jews rejected this message meant that they were under God's judgment and would soon experience God's manifestation of judgment, especially in 70 AD.

### Some points of Application:

1. The gift of tongues: This is the gift of another human dialect or language used to preach the gospel to another person. The idea of “speaking in tongues” in a way that is not an intelligible human language is completely foreign to the Bible. Even a careful study of I Corinthians 14 would bear witness to this point.
2. The New Testament was written in a foreign tongue. In this way God judged anyone who thought that Scripture could only be written in the Hebrew dialect. The Bible we have written in our own language testifies to the magnitude of the Spirit’s work on the day of Pentecost.
3. We are still called to be filled with the Holy Spirit. (Eph.5:18) Yet many Christians make serious mistakes when they try to experience and replicate the experience of Apostles here on the Day of Pentecost. We are filled with the Spirit when we walk in obedience to God’s word, seeking to glorify Him. The sacrament of water baptism is used to signify the filling of the Holy Spirit. It is the work of God’s Spirit that fills us, leads us, and empowers us as we continually improve our baptism with faith and repentance.