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## Chapter 2

# Evangelization and the Holy Spirit

Acts 2:1-21, 37-42

### UNDERSTANDING

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### DISCUSSION

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UNDERSTANDING

# WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

*Read Acts 2:1-21, 37-42*

## The Big Picture

The Holy Spirit is instrumental to our evangelization.

## The Feast of Pentecost

When most Christians hear the word “Pentecost,” they immediately think of the coming of the Holy Spirit in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. But before this event, the Feast of Pentecost had a deep tradition within the Jewish culture.

The Feast of Pentecost was celebrated approximately 50 days after the Passover. In the Acts of the Apostles, this would have been 50 days after Jesus’ death. The feast of Passover was one of three pilgrim feasts that required Jewish men to travel to Jerusalem. It has agricultural roots, but theological significance was added over time. In particular, it evolved into a renewal of the Jews’ covenant with God and a celebration of the giving of the Torah, the Jewish law. It is during this Jewish feast that the Holy Spirit comes in a powerful way to the apostles.

## **Expectation of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-13)**

The coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts can appear strange and almost random to the 21st-century reader. The Spirit comes suddenly, mightily, and with “tongues of fire.” The author is keen to mention not only that the preaching of the apostles was translated into several languages, but he also takes the pains to mention a long list of nationalities, some which we might not recognize.

Similar to the background of the Feast of Pentecost, the background of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament can help us understand the true significance of what is going on in the passage.

The coming of the Holy Spirit was tied up with a new age where a Messiah king would re-establish the Jewish kingdom. One such passage in the Old Testament comes from the prophet Ezekiel. Speaking of this new age, Ezekiel says,

For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses.... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you.... I will make them one nation in the land, upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. (Ezekiel 36:24-26; 37:22)

In Acts 2, the author, Luke, is going out of his way to show that the prophecies of the Old Testament like this one from Ezekiel are being fulfilled.

Here are a few insights on how the Old Testament prophecies are being fulfilled.

### *The Nations*

One of the biggest problems of restoring the kingdom of Israel is that her people had been taken into exile. Out of the twelve tribes of Israel, the ten northern tribes were taken into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and eventually most of these members of Israel married people from other nationalities. The Jewish covenant was based on marrying within Judaism and staying within the land.

But prophets like Ezekiel prophesied that God would still be able to gather these Jews from the nations through His Spirit (Ezekiel 36:24). Here in Acts, we get a foretaste of this saving action by God, as Israelites from all over are hearing the message of the New Covenant. At the same time, the roadmap found in Acts 1:8 (mentioned in Chapter 1 of this study) is beginning to be fulfilled.

### *New Law*

The tradition of the Jewish Pentecost focused on the giving of the Torah or Jewish law. Here, God is placing a new law on the hearts of mankind through the giving of the Holy Spirit.

### *Tongues of Fire*

Maybe the most odd and amazing part of this event is the crowd's ability to hear the apostles' preaching in their own language. This would have been particularly odd for the crowd to hear, because many of the apostles would have been from Galilee, a region not known for its intelligence or crafty speech. Maybe the best explanation for this incredible sign is the Old Testament account of the Tower of Babel. At the tower of Babel, God confused and scattered the builders by giving them different languages. Here, God gathers His people together through one language.

## **Application to Jesus**

The coming of Jesus brings a new age of the Holy Spirit.

### **St. Peter's Presentation of the Gospel (Acts 2:14-21)**

As the appointed shepherd of the apostles and the Church while Jesus is gone (Matthew 16:16-20), St. Peter steps up to explain to the crowd what is going on. He specifically notes a passage from the prophet Joel to explain how the Holy Spirit is coming at this time.

This passage from Joel 2:28-32 plays an important role in the Acts of the Apostles. Several of the quotes within the passage occur throughout the book of Acts.

*Example Joel passages used in Acts:*

- Your daughters shall prophesy (Acts 21:8-9)
- Young men shall see visions (Acts 9:10)
- Wonders and signs (Acts 2:22; 14:3; 15:12)
- Calling upon the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16)

St. Peter's testimony continues to recount the basic facts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection while also showing how this fits into the prophecies of the Old Testament.

### **The Crowd's Reaction (Acts 2:37-42)**

The crowd is cut to the heart after St. Peter's testimony about Jesus. They ask him, "What shall we do?" St. Peter instructs them to be baptized so that their sins may be forgiven, and through this Baptism they too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; for more on the Catholic Church's view on baptism and the Holy Spirit, see CCC 1213-1216).

Three thousand followers were added that day through the preaching of St. Peter. These people go on to live out the four characteristics of the early Church and our Church today: "the apostles' teaching [Scripture], fellowship, breaking of the bread [the Mass], and...the prayers" (Acts 2:41-42).

There are several directions that your group could go as they begin to unravel the deep meaning found in these verses. While it is easy to get caught up in the historical background or prophesy surrounding this passage, be sure to make the verses apply to the lives of the participant. We are all called to be open to the Holy Spirit and deepen the Spirit's action in our lives. How do we open our hearts to allow the Spirit to move more deeply?

#### **Application to Our Lives**

How can we build the habit of being open to the Holy Spirit?



DISCUSSION

# DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

*Acts 2:1-21, 37-42*

## **STEP 1: OPENER**

Today, we are looking at Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. When you think of the Holy Spirit, what comes to mind?

## **STEP 2: BACKDROP**

When most Christians hear the word “Pentecost,” they immediately think of the coming of the Holy Spirit in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. But before this event, the Feast of Pentecost had a deep tradition within the Jewish culture.

The Feast of Pentecost was celebrated approximately 50 days after the Passover. In the Acts of the Apostles, this would have been 50 days after Jesus’ death. The feast of Pentecost was one of three pilgrim feasts that required Jewish men to travel to Jerusalem. It has agricultural roots, but theological significance was added over time. In particular, it evolved into a renewal of the Jews’ covenant with God and a celebration of the giving of the Torah, the Jewish law. It is during this Jewish feast that the Holy Spirit comes in a powerful way to the apostles.



### **STEP 3: PASSAGE**

Today's passage is Acts 2:1-21, 37-42. Start by reading Acts 2:1-14.

### **STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Note that answers appear in italics.

#### **Exploration: Questions and Answers**

**1. Similar to the background to the Feast of Pentecost, the background of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament can help us understand the true significance of what is going on in the passage. Read Ezekiel 36:24-27 and Ezekiel 37:21-23. In these passages, Ezekiel is talking about a new age of restoration. What is included in this new age?**

*Answer: Some elements: Sprinkling of new water (Baptism), a new heart, God's spirit, gathering of His people from the nations, one nation under one king.*

**2. What elements found in Ezekiel are found here in Acts 2:1-14?**

*Answer: We see the foretaste of the Lord gathering the Jews from all the countries (Ezekiel 36:24; Acts 2:8-11). God is putting a new Spirit into His people (Ezekiel 36:27; Acts 2:1-4).*

**3. What do you think is the significance of the apostles' being able to speak in multiple languages?**

*Answer: It allows the Lord to gather up the Jews from every nation. See the Tongues of Fire paragraph in the "Expectation of the Holy Spirit" section in "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" for more background.*

**4. Read Acts 2:1-4 closely. What does St. Luke emphasize regarding who receives the Holy Spirit?**

*Answer: He emphasizes that everyone receives the Holy Spirit who was gathered by using the words "each one of them" and "all filled."*

**5. Do you think that everyone is called to receive the Holy Spirit?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**6. Why do you think some people shy away from the Holy Spirit?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

## **Read Acts 2:14-21**

*Note to Leader: Feel free to share the paragraphs under "St. Peter's Presentation of the Gospel" on how this passage relates to the rest of the Acts of the Apostles.*

### **7. Why do you think St. Peter uses the Old Testament as an explanation of the gospel?**

*Answer: His audience was Jewish so he tells them what was happening in a way that they would understand.*

### **8. The prophecy from Joel is lived out throughout the Acts of the Apostles. Daughters prophesy in Acts 21:8-9, young men see visions in Acts 9:10, and wonders and signs happen throughout the book. What are some ways that we can show the Holy Spirit is working in our lives today?**

*Allow the group to discuss. Note to the Leader: Find out how the crowd reacts to St. Peter's speech by reading Acts 2:37-42.*

### **9. Many respond positively to Peter's testimony and ask the apostles what they can do. What does St. Peter tell them?**

*Answer: Be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins so that they can receive the Holy Spirit.*

**10. After receiving the Holy Spirit, what four things do these first Christian do to live out this gift?**

*Answer: Apostles' teaching (Scripture), fellowship, breaking of the bread (the Mass), and to the prayers.*

**11. Which one of these do you need work on?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

**12. Do you have a specific goal in mind? How will you reach this goal?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*



