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RUF Bible Study – The Gospel According to Peter
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The Preacher – Acts 1-15

From Acts 2: *When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them....*

That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency: "Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight. These people aren't drunk as some of you suspect. They haven't had time to get drunk—it's only nine o'clock in the morning. This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen: "In the Last Days," God says, "I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people:

Fellow Israelites, listen carefully to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man thoroughly accredited by God to you—the miracles and wonders and signs that God did through him are common knowledge—this Jesus, following the deliberate and well-thought-out plan of God, was betrayed by men who took the law into their own hands, and was handed over to you. And you pinned him to a cross and killed him. But God untied the death ropes and raised him up. Death was no match for him. David said it all: I saw God before me for all time. Nothing can shake me; he's right by my side. I'm glad from the inside out, ecstatic; I've pitched my tent in the land of hope. I know you'll never dump me in Hades; I'll never even smell the stench of death. You've got my feet on the life-path, with your face shining sun-joy all around....

Cut to the quick, those who were there listening asked Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers! Brothers! So now what do we do?" Peter said, "Change your life. Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is targeted to you and your children, but also to all who are far away—whomever, in fact, our Master God invites."

We have a transition here as you can see. We have now left the gospels. We're now into church history and we'll soon get into some of Peter's letters.

Think back to the end of the gospels. We have a resurrected Jesus, a few disciples and not much more. In fact, some of the earliest manuscripts end the book of Mark here: *8 And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

This is rather underwhelming. Afraid.

So, let me ask you this questions: how did we get here? Whatever you think of Christianity, you have to admit is a powerful force in the world and has grown past these 20 or so afraid people.

Skeptics, how do you account for this? The burden of proof is on you, skeptic, to explain how this grew to be what we know today, especially if you think the basic message and foundation of Christianity is totally false.

In our text of Acts 2, we see the Bible's explanation of how and why this happened. But you may not like it. The Bible says that the church grew, that Christianity took hold of the world because of something supernatural – the Holy Spirit.

Now we all have different reactions to the Holy Spirit. Some of you have charismania – you're totally into the Holy Spirit. Others of you have charisphobia – you want to run for the hills any time anyone starts to talk about this. If you're not a Christian, you probably look at this sort of passage and scratch your head and think this is all crazy, this inexplicable religious enthusiasm.

If you are a Christian, you most likely think this passage is about an inward, personal experience, about a personal prayer language, about how you and God can be really, totally connected. And most of you have questions about this passage – am I supposed to be seeing this today? Should we expect this? Am I supposed to have this? Is this relevant?

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www.ouruf.org.
For this series, I used commentaries all throughout the gospels. I also used as my base text Michael Card's book, *The Fragile Stone*. I consulted sermons by Rev. Tim Keller found out www.redeemer.com and RUF Campus Minister Les Newsom in many instances. This message also has gleanings from RUF Campus Minister Fritz Games. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

Let's back up and go about this in a different way. My friend and pastor Fritz Games has been touting a book, *Salvation at Sand Mountain*. It's about a pastor who killed his wife by – snakes. He was in a snake handling church and from what I understand when he would get drunk, he'd make his wife put her hand down into the cobras to see if she'd get bit. One time I guess she did.

According to Fritz Games, the man who wrote the book immersed himself in the life of the church and came away with an appreciation for these people. He says there is a certain strange and profound rush to holding this reptile and knowing that you cannot control the outcome, that you are in total trust of what is about to happen.

Do you feel like this? To hold the snake? Have you gotten to the place where you don't feel like you can control your roommates? Have you heard your boyfriend say for the fiftieth time, "We're not going to do this again," and you think to yourself, "Yeah right." Do you keep thinking that "One of these days we're going to get this under control." Whatever your *this* is. Can you control your need for approval? Can you control your eating, or your not eating? Can you control your body? Have you figured out that you can't get by on two hours of sleep a night? Many of you will experience the death of your grandparents, the break up of your parents' marriage, the pain of heartbreak in college. You'll see that there isn't much control. You'll get bit.

And when I bring these sorts of topics up to you, why are you so defensive all the time? Can't you control your control?

For most of you I would guess that your conscience and your guilt are wearing you out. You read the Bible, come to RUF, go wherever you go, sit in church and you realize you haven't kept the law and you wonder, what do I do with this? I can't get control of this. Maybe you're in the same place you were a year ago and you said you wouldn't still be here. You have no joy, no peace.

Acts 2 is for you, my friends. You need something and it's not what you expect. You need to give over control to the Holy Spirit in your life. Yes, I'm a Presbyterian minister and I'm talking about the Holy Spirit. It's okay.

Let's look and see what this passage tells us about God's control instead of ours. To do that, let's look at Pentecost itself, the wind and fire, and the tongues.

Pentecost²

What are your feelings about your dvd player's scene selection function? Do you like to skip around and watch your favorite sections over and over?

We often take that approach with the Bible. We have a few scenes that we watch again and again, without taking into context the whole story. Acts 2 is one of those scenes we select. But do you know there has been a movie going on that Acts 2 connects with and makes sense of? Well – what is Pentecost?

Pentecost is a Jewish holiday, and was originally a harvest celebration, a feast of first fruits. The Israelites would bring the first parts of their crops. These would be examples or samples of what was to come later, a measure of anticipating God's goodness. They would lay these on the altar to God, giving to him freely and asking him to bless the upcoming harvest.

So, we ask ourselves, why would the Holy Spirit choose this day? God is saying that we will taste and see that this is the down payment of what is yet to come. It's a reversal of sorts. Instead of us bringing our firstfruits to God, he is bringing his first fruits to us, to his people. He's saying, "This is what's coming."

Think about that. Surely you've already realized that nothing really lasts, right? Have you become jaded yet? It happens you know. Things go wrong. And that's sort of built into the nature of the universe. Scientists tell us that the universe is expending more energy than it's producing. Things are being used. Sin happens.

But this text, this Pentecost tells us about the Kingdom of God. And it tells us that behind the idea of the Kingdom of God is the concept that he will one day stop the decay and make everything glorious. Paul says this – we await the transformation of the entire cosmos.

Many of you think that the purpose of the Holy Spirit is to transport you into an ecstatic spiritual experience. That we're trying to escape this body, this earth, these problems and get into a spiritual world (this is Buddhism by the way).

But the Holy Spirit didn't come to detach you from reality. The Holy Spirit comes to send you *into* reality, to send you into every place the curse is found. Where is the curse found? In your soul, your neighborhood, your sorority or fraternity house, your state, your family, your club, your organization, your church.

Realize that you see the work of the Holy Spirit *all the time*. Wherever you see things being brought from disorder to order, ugliness to beauty, tragedy to triumph you see the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is at work way more often than you think. I think the secondary title to the new Paste magazine is good – signs of life in music, film and culture. That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

This is the down payment, which means that the rest is coming. God is not going to default on the payments. He is surely going to do it. That is the promise. He is control and more is coming. It's going to be good. Shalom will be restored.

² This outline may be from Tim Keller. Les Newsom says it is, but I didn't check.

You will be changed, transformed. He is in control. He will do it. Your life and the whole cosmos will one day be made right, made perfect. That's Pentecost. Not what you bring to God, but what he brings to you.

Wind and Fire

My dad had some groovy records that I grew up listening to. One of them I remember was Earth, Wind and Fire. They rocked the house. We don't have earth here, but we do have wind and fire. The text doesn't say that their tongues were on fire, just to be clear. That would be KISS and not Earth, Wind and Fire. Tongues of fire really just means fire.

When we turn our DVD scene selection off, we notice that whenever we read about wind and fire showing up unexpectedly, we are hearing about God showing up. It is God.

Remember back when the fire led the people and then stood over the tabernacle. That was God. When Moses went up to the mountain to receive the law, there was thunder and lightning and fire.

So in Acts 2, we are reading about God. And God's presence is now on everyone, not just at the temple. In fact, it's not at the temple at all. It's with his people, localized with his people.

When God shows up, then what happens? Verse 11 tells us that, in their own language they each heard of God's mighty works. But you'll notice that the text doesn't tell us what those mighty works are.

What are the mighty works? Or let me ask it another way – how can I know if I have the Holy Spirit like these people do?

Ah, it's another DVD whole movie problem. Turning off scene selection helps us. For we realize that Pentecost occurred on the same day as when Moses went up to get the law for his people. After getting the law, Moses had a request of God; he wanted to see God's presence. So God set him into the rock (Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me) and passed by him saying this as a summary of his glory:

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

So here we have God's glory. What is God's glory? God is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love, steadfast in faithfulness, forgiving sin. He has a compassion and forgiveness oath. He longs to be with his people, in fellowship with his creation.

AND... He will by no means clear the guilty, he will judge harshly violators of his law. He has a holy and just oath, promising that he will judge. This is not a suggestion, but an absolute and eternal decree, stating that the soul that sins is the soul that shall die.

That is God's glory. Both. How is God going to keep both oaths?

Most of us serve a god either or. Some of you have a just god with no love. He is rules and order and judges people and will not tolerate wrong. If that is you, then you are wildly insecure. You have to be in control and you have no idea what to do with the neediness of people. So you try to manipulate your surroundings so you can deal with life.

Others of you serve a god of love with no justice. He is all forgiving and sets no real rules for your life or anyone else's. There are no parameters because God will forgive me, you think. If this is you, then you are set free to pursue all the things that will ultimately destroy you. And why do you get angry when people do "wrong things"? What basis do you have for right and wrong? God's forgiveness for whatever you do – on what basis do you believe this?

Do you see the problem here? This is the problem of the whole Bible. God is loving. God is just. God loves his people. God hates sin. Life and death. How will this be reconciled?

If you don't separate the two of them and actually have both in tension, then the only way to reconcile them is in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus has done both. God says, I will absolutely punish with every ounce of my wrath – on a lamb, on a perfect lamb, and God pours out his wrath on Jesus until he has none left. So he can love his people. In the very same act, he gains fellowship with his people

So what are the wonders of God they were talking about? They talked about Jesus – he was the only one answer to the mystery of God relating to his people.

That's what was so crazy. God's wondrous works! Have you found something praiseworthy of God? Has God's work captured your imagination or do you just not want to go to hell when you die?

Have you ever seen the wonders of God? That's how you can know you have the Holy Spirit.

There's one other thing we see here, sort of an auxiliary application. God usually comes when people are together in one place. He does come individually, but he *promises* that when people gather he's there.

What does this mean for us? Sure, I want you to read your Bibles and pray by yourselves, but you have to make time to be with others in church, in small group Bible studies, here at RUF. Make it a point to be there. Others will point you to God. And you will point others to God.

Don't isolate yourself too much. That's not how the Holy Spirit works. He propels you out to other people. Move into the dorms. Join clubs and organizations. Be available. People in these places need to see Jesus, and you will bear witness to him if you are there. But not if you aren't there. Being inconvenienced and uncomfortable is a part of testimony. The gifts of the Spirit are to be used with other people, not to build up yourself. Do you have or display these gifts? Do you witness to the wonder and work of God? Are you around others using your gifts? Do you see how amazing Jesus really is?

The gift of tongues

So at Pentecost we have God showing up in the wind and fire, and we have the wonderment of love and justice coming together on the cross.

And we have speaking in tongues. So let's be clear on this. These means, at least here, these people were for a time able to talk in languages they didn't know when they grew up. This isn't an unknown prayer language. They were speaking known languages and hearing them in their own one.

The significance is found in verse 9 where we're told about the list of nations gathered. The last time this list appeared was in Genesis 11. And what is the significance of Genesis 11? The Tower of Babel is in that chapter, and you might recall that at the end of that story, God comes down and confuses their languages. God frustrates them so they can't work together against his will.

So here, in a connection with that story. God is now saying the opposite. He's reversing the curse. "I'm lifting my curse off of you and there will now be a force that brings people together."

Because of this miracle, all the people there are able to hear the message of Jesus.

So what do tongues have to do with us? I'm not going to do a speaking in tongues workshop. You don't have to speak in tongues to be a Christian. That's not the message and importance of Acts 2. What is then?

It's this, and I'm stealing from Les Newsom: Tongues relativizes your background.

What do I mean? When the gospel comes in, when the Holy grips you, it takes everything that you are clinging to as a source of your identity and it relativizes it. You put it in an entirely different perspective. You start to say, I can take it or leave it because my primary identity is what Jesus has for me. This goes for all things in your life: Social styles, music styles, political parties, etc.

The gospel displaces your background so it won't be the most important thing in your life. Those identity markers that you have, that you care about fade away compared to serving and loving Jesus in your life. You start to care less about differentiates you and more about what unifies you. We all care about Jesus!

The tongues of Acts 2 shows us not a miracle that strengthens our faith, but a miracles that brings us together and tears down our differences.

What does this mean practically for you?

It means that, if you truly understand the Kingdom of God is at work in your life, that it doesn't matter what sorority you're in. In the grand scheme of things, the people in this room are your true brothers and sisters, your true big sisters, your true little brothers, and you have more in common with them than the others.

That's true about your money background. About what car you drive. What broken or wonderful home you come from. What you look like. Your shape. Your color. Your...

This text tells us you need to get rid of your cultural hang-ups. Your shape, gender, background – get over it. God is creating a new humanity. God loves your cultural background, but demotes it and says "I'm the thing that draws you together."

And when we're together, I'm speaking and communicating to you about Jesus. That's what the Spirit enables them to do. Not be better speakers or spiritual big shots or have their lives together. The Spirit helps them talk and hear about Jesus. It breaks barriers. It doesn't create them.

Be careful about slipping into a third language, the Christian one in a bad way. Words like sin, justification, sanctification, and propitiation need to be in our language and culture. They are important ideas. But Christian tshirts, Christian lingo, jokes, music and dare I say fraternities and sororities are a dangerous thing. Jesus was with the drunkards and tax collectors. The New Testament was written in Koine Greek, which wasn't the high language of the day but instead was the common slang, the redneck language, as Fritz Games puts it so eloquently.

Christians, what are we communicating?

God cares about the world. He cares about all these nations and more. He cares about undoing lost and broken people and setting them right again. He cares about redemption and reconciliation. He cares about restoration. He saves sinners. Are you interested in that? Are you interested in getting over yourself, past yourself and out there into helping and serving others. The gifts of the Spirit are for you, to get you thinking about others.

Goodness gracious, that must have been quite a day. And let me mention this – Peter is the one who gave the sermon. He has gone from a scared, pathetic betrayer to a bold, confident preacher. God is at work changing his life, don't you see? Jesus has changed him. The passion of Simon's heart was Jesus. In his sermon, he doesn't mention himself at all. He's not trying to impress his audience. He wants us to know the truth, what he has seen and heard. The good news has

come. He tells us about Jesus, and wants us to know that his has been foretold to us. Turn from foolishness and destruction to life and peace. Peter has four sermons in Acts, two full ones and two that get interrupted. He's a changed man, a leader now with a purpose and a passion to point us to Christ.

Peter goes through this sermon and passionately points you to repent and turn to the church for the forgiveness of Christ. Many of you walk through the day nodding your heads at sermons like this, you've heard them time and time again. But hear the word of God for you today. Repent. Believe. Be baptized for the kingdom of God is near for you. Broken Peter tells you this. You feel out of control? Listen for God. You need help? God's Spirit will help you.

It's a lot like the woman at the well in John 4. She can't control her life either. Then Jesus comes in and changes her too. Put the snake down. Give God the control of your life. Like Peter. It's not easy, but it's worth it. Repent and believe in this Jesus. He's really real and he really matters.