

## Pentecost

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Pentecostal movement raised a question for biblical interpreters. Pentecostals studied the events of the Day of Pentecost and concluded that every Christian's life should imitate the experience of the early Christians on that day. Most pointedly, they concluded that all Christians should speak in tongues or prophesy as described in Ac 2. In contrast, other interpreters view these events as unique and miraculous—not something Christians must imitate.

Based on ancient Jewish sources, this article will explore the setting for the miraculous events of Pentecost. It will help you gain a deeper understanding of God's true purpose behind this remarkable event: the inclusion of every tongue, tribe, and nation in God's kingdom.

### The Gathering

According to Josephus (*War* 6:299), on Pentecost eve, the priests began to gather at the inner court of the temple. Jewish people from around the ancient Near East would already have filled the city, because they could not travel far on the previous day, the Sabbath (*Ant* 13:251–52).

On Pentecost morning, farmers from around Jerusalem gathered baskets with several types of food (see Mishnah Bikkurim 1:3, 10; see also pp 200–201). A flute player led the farmers up Mount Zion as they sang the Songs of Ascents (Ps 120–36). This liturgy of procession and psalms was known as the Great Hallel (Hbr *Hallel Hagadol*). Psalm 136 served as a climax of praise to God, “who alone does great wonders” (v 4; Hbr *Naphla’oth gedoloth*): creating the earth, delivering the people out of Egypt, and conquering the Promised Land from which the farmers gathered their offerings.

As the procession neared the city, officials went out to join the procession up to the Temple Mount. The king placed a basket of food on his shoulder and led the people into the temple courts as the Levites sang Ps 30, written for the temple dedication (see note, Ps 30).

### The Offering

In the temple courts, the farmers would present their baskets before the priests. Each farmer would step forward and say the liturgy of recitation (Dt 26:3). He would remove the basket from his shoulder and tip it toward the priest. The priest took hold of the basket, and the two of them swayed it back and forth as a “wave” offering. Then the farmer would recite in Hebrew, “A wandering Aramean was my father ...” (Dt 26:5–10a). He would leave the basket, bow before the Lord, and make way for the next farmer.

But a controversy arose about the recitation. The priest would have to lead the people who could not speak Hebrew. He would say a part in Hebrew, and the person making the offering would repeat it. This apparently embarrassed people. They stopped bringing their offerings. As a result, the priests decided that they would lead all the people in the recitation, whether or not they knew Hebrew. In this way, they continued to receive everyone's offering but also retained Hebrew as the language of temple services.

### Rejoice, Remember, and Follow

According to Dt 26:11 and 16:11–12, “rejoicing” and “remembering” followed the offering. The rabbis tell us that the priests led the people in prayer according to the daily prayer customs. This likely included recitation of the 18 Benedictions and the Shema (Dt 6:4–9). They also sang the festival psalms known as the Egyptian Hallel (Ps 113–18). They shouted Ps 118:15–17, 22–23 (cf Mt 21:1–11).

## Pentecost

A service of covenant renewal called by King Asa during the third month of the year is described in 2Ch 15:10–15. It is likely that this renewal was during the Festival of Pentecost. Later Jewish tradition made an oath to the covenant part of the Pentecost celebration (see the pseudepigraphal book Jubilees, especially chs 6 and 22). The people promised to follow the teachings of the covenant each year on Pentecost.

### **The Miracle of Pentecost**

The Festival of Pentecost gives us a better understanding of the events described in Ac 2. For example, Jewish people who spoke a variety of languages would have gathered at the temple courts to make their offering and repeat the recitation in Hebrew. They would sing psalms extolling the wonders of God and participate in a ceremony of renewal.

The miraculous gift of tongues (“languages,” see p 1969) demonstrated to everyone who heard them that God desired all people to have His Word, not just the Hebrew speakers. This use of foreign language was a sign to the Jewish people, who had failed to heed the prophets and call the nations to repentance (Is 28:11–12; 1Co 14:21; see p 751). They heard the first Christians praising God for His great deeds, such as those recorded in the Great Hallel. Finally, Peter’s sermon culminates in a service of renewal: Baptism in the name of the Savior Jesus!

### **Genuine Renewal**

On Pentecost, the Lord called His people to abandon the language barrier they had set up. The miraculous events of Ac 2:1–4 do not describe everyday Christian life but God’s special lesson for the first Jewish Christians: God poured out His Spirit because He wanted to include all nations and tongues in the new covenant. God replays this lesson throughout Acts as new people join the Church (the Samaritans and Ethiopians, Ac 8; the Gentiles, Ac 10; and the disciples of John the Baptist, Ac 19:1–7).

Ac 2:42 describes how the early Christians enjoyed the very things that shape and guide everyday Christian life today. Rather than emphasizing that all believers must imitate the experience of Ac 2:1–4, the Book of Acts emphasizes God’s mission of carrying the Gospel to all people (e.g., 1:8, 21–22; 3:24–26; 4:12, 31; 6:1; 7:51–53) and joining them in the Body of Christ through Baptism (e.g., 2:37–39, 41; 8:12–13, 36–38; 10:47–48; 16:15, 33; 18:8).

Today, the renewal the Church needs is the same renewal God gave the first Christians: Baptism. In Baptism, God pours out His Holy Spirit. He forgives sins and includes people in the apostolic fellowship. Rather than trying to imitate the events of Pentecost, turn to God’s promise of renewal in Baptism through daily repentance. Then, filled with peace through Christ, turn with joy to the people around you—no matter who they are or where they come from—and bear witness to them of the renewal you have received in Christ.