

PENTECOST – THE BIRTHDAY OF THE CHURCH

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Scripture: Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4, 8; 2:36-41; 4:1-10; 5:17-20, 29-32, 37-42; 8:36-40; Gal 5:16-17, 22-25; 2 Tim 1:3-10; Eph 5:15-20; John 13:34-35; 17:20-23.

Today is celebrated as Pentecost Sunday all over the world. Today also, rightly speaking, is the birthday of the church; it's because of God's Holy Spirit that we have the church. That's very important. So when we meditate on Pentecost Sunday, we would see how God's spirit enabled the first century church to grow and what is the relevance to us today.

Let us pray.

Lord, we thank You for this day. Thank You for this wonderful opportunity You have given and we thank You and praise You for the Holy Spirit, how You enabled the first century church to grow in spite of all persecution and difficulties. And Lord, we pray that as we meditate on Your word, You would speak to each and every one of us. We pray that You would give us boldness and the power which we need to be Your witness in this world where You have kept us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

The very last words of Jesus had to do with God's Spirit. Let us read from two portions to start with.

Luke 24:49 *I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.*

Acts 1:4, 8 ⁴ *Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.*

⁸ *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

In these two verses both written by Luke, we see that Jesus asked His disciples to wait for the power that would come, which is God's Spirit. Now, it is very important to remember that Jesus asked them to wait. He did not ask them to start. What is the reason? The reason is because without the power of God's Holy Spirit, they could not have done anything. This is very important for us also to remember. It is so important to have God's Holy Spirit power.

One of the first things when we see God's Holy Spirit, especially in the context of church and how the Church started, is the power and also the boldness. In Acts 3, we read about a crippled man who was sitting there, who was fairly old, about 40-plus years old. When Peter and John were going for prayer, they looked at this particular crippled man and they took him by hand and he was healed. And there was such a miracle which was noticed by everybody, and that showed all the people around God's Spirit's power.

Regarding boldness, just a few weeks prior, all these disciples including Peter who kind of boasted that even if others leave you, I will not leave you. We know that Peter and all disciples ran away and at the time of crucifixion, there was only one disciple who was at the cross, which was John. All other disciples had gone. Even after resurrection, all the disciples were staying indoors, and it is very clearly mentioned that they were staying indoors for fear of the Jews. They were so scared and that is why Jesus told them: Wait till you are empowered by God's Spirit. Now, these very same disciples who were so scared, so frightened – you see the difference. In Acts 2, when God's Spirit came and when they all started speaking in tongues, and these tongues were languages which were understood by

others who were there. And we will see why God gave these tongues at that time. now, this very same Peter who was so scared, we see what he is talking about.

Acts 2, we read what Peter said to the whole crowd after explaining what is happening.

³⁶ *“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”*

⁴⁰ *With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”* And we see that at the end of this sermon. ⁴¹ *Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

You can see what happened immediately to these frightened disciples and these apostles, once God’s Spirit gave them boldness, what they were able to achieve. And it continues. We see in the entire book of Acts of the Apostles, somebody said it’s actually Acts of God’s Spirit, how the church progressed. And again, the other thing we see, other than God’s power being revealed through miracles, boldness of the apostles and others, the other thing we see is God’s prompting. Interestingly, you see that on many occasions, especially in Acts of the Apostles, they would say, “God’s Spirit asked us to do this.” Let us see one such portion.

In Acts 8, a familiar portion where it talks about Philip who was one of the seven.

²⁶ *Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”* And once he goes there, God’s Spirit led him to this particular chariot where a eunuch, who was in charge of the treasury of Candice, the queen of Ethiopia, was riding, and he was reading from the Book of Isaiah. And he didn’t know what he was reading. And Philip asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” and he was welcomed in and Philip explained to him the whole gospel. At the end of it, the official said, “I want to get baptized.” This very same man who did not understand, he accepted Jesus and was baptized.

So you see another aspect of God’s Spirit – very specifically leading and giving a direction what to do. Soon after this incident, Philip disappeared. God’s Spirit took him somewhere else. This is something we see God doing.

Another interesting thing. Jesus’ crucifixion, or rather the time of crucifixion and even after the resurrection, all the disciples were very scared. They were very worried about their own lives. Now, after God’s Spirit empowered them, they didn’t care about their lives. Self-preservation was no longer their agenda; they were not worried about it.

Acts 4 You see again in the context of the healing that happened, when Peter and John and the others preached, you see the *reaction* of the leaders.

¹ *The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. ² They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³ They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. ⁴ But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.*

You can see the church growing fast and at the same time, Peter and John were put in prison. What was their response?

⁸ *Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹ If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: it is by the name of Jesus Christ of*

Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed."

You can see that they are no more scared; they are very bold. Not only that, you see that they were flogged, they were beaten up, again threatened that you should not preach any more. If you turn to Acts 5, from v.17 onwards, they are being persecuted and they are not worried.

¹⁷ Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ²⁰ "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this life."

They were put in jail and in the middle of the night, God's angel freed them. Now think about what really happened the next morning. The whole council met. They were all waiting and they asked for the apostles to be brought. And you see the commotion. They found that the jail is very securely locked. Guards are standing outside but nobody inside. Imagine the scenario if something like this happened today. Then somebody said, "No, the people whom you are looking for, they are actually preaching in the temple courts. And so they were brought again.

²⁷ The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. ²⁸ "We gave strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."

Listen to the reply that Peter gives. *²⁹ Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men! ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead – whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."*

Now again, you see that obviously these leaders were extremely angry and at the time, this wise man Gamaliel asked these people to be put out and he gave the leaders some advice.

³⁸ "Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

Now, Gamaliel's advice was wise counsel. Down the centuries, starting from the first, the entire might of the Roman Empire tried to completely wipe out Christians. What Gamaliel said was true. If it was of human origin, it would have failed by now. But because it was something started by God's Spirit, no one has been able to wipe it out, though many have tried. Today, when we hear about persecution, we often get disturbed. But always remember, Jesus also gave His promise in Matthew 16, "The gates of hell will never prevail over the church." But I believe that we can destroy the church through disunity and other means.

We see that the apostles were beaten up at the end of this. And what was their response? They rejoiced.

Acts 5:41 The apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.

See how God's Spirit empowered them. They were no more worried about their lives. They were no more worried about self-preservation. You see how the church progressed and how they were together in prayer, in service, in fellowship. And the church increased day by day.

As the church progressed, another aspect of God's Spirit's ministry among them was that God's Spirit equipped them. In the day of Pentecost, they all spoke in different tongues, and all people who were assembled there, understood those languages. In ch.8 it is mentioned about the big persecution which followed Stephen's stoning. All the others, other than the apostles, had to leave Jerusalem and Judea. They went all over the place. Now, God had given them this gift of different languages which was very handy. Now they could preach, teach. God equipped them.

God gave them power, God gave them boldness, God directed their ways, and God also equipped them. God's Spirit made sure that God's work would continue. Today, when we look at ourselves, do we find something missing among ourselves? Reading all these chapters, we might wonder: What about us? What about the state of the church today? In this context, I thought I would specifically talk about 3 things about being witnesses in our own generation. All this happened 21 centuries ago; how to be witnesses in our own generation.

Being a witness today.

We will briefly look at three areas.

1. Living in the Spirit.

Galatians 5:16-17 ¹⁶ So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

2. Fruit of the Spirit.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

3. Led by the Spirit.

One of the most important conditions to be witnesses in our generation is to be led by the Spirit, to be controlled by the Spirit. As we are led by God's Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit will be evident in our life. Fruit is always for others. All those who see us will be able to see God's Spirit empowering us and God would get the glory.

Let me take it to another aspect.

2 Timothy 1. This is Paul's very last letter, and it is believed that a few weeks after writing this letter to Timothy, Paul was killed.

³ I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. ⁴ Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵ I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

⁶ For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. ⁷ For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and discipline. ⁸ So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God. ⁹ He has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.

Now we see here Paul's strong instruction to Timothy, to be a faithful witness to the Lord. I want to bring out 2 or 3 things which Paul mentioned to Timothy.

- “⁶ For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.” One of the things which God’s Spirit does, and all of us who have received Jesus into our hearts, the bible says that God’s Spirit makes permanent residence with us. The question is whether we give the authority and control over to God’s Spirit. That’s in our hand. God’s Spirit will never take that control away from us. If we surrender our life to God, then God’s Spirit would use us.

One very important aspect of God’s Spirit in our personal life is that you can be sure that God’s Spirit will give you a gift. And the New Testament talks a lot about the spiritual gifts. Unfortunately, we very seldom talk about spiritual gifts. Let me assure you that each one of you sitting here who have received Jesus, you have a gift. The question is: Are you aware of it. I always quote my example. Me standing here, you might think I am very bold. But I am the most timid person. God’s Spirit has enabled me today to teach his students boldly. God’s Spirit would have given not one, but at least two or three gifts to each one of you.

We need to identify those gifts. Paul tells Timothy – Fan into flame the gift of God. That is our part. God’s Spirit has been given to us, and we need to find what the gift is. Having understood it, it is our job to fan into flame, make it grow. Why? it is for God’s service and also for building up the church. Many of us come to church just to receive. But we forget that we should come to church to worship God – not to receive but to give. Give what? We need to encourage one another, build one another up. And I’ll read a scripture portion for you. That’s where God’s gifts need to be used. When the first century church came together, they were close to each other, they were united, they cared for each other. All this needs to happen today. And it can happen.

- “⁷ For God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-discipline.” That’s something to remind ourselves. The latter part of v.8 says, “join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.” Now, in the first century when Paul wrote this, ‘suffer the gospel’ was literally suffering. In the first century, if you said you were a Christian, you actually signed your death warrant. You would be hunted. Today, it may not be true for most of us, but still in some countries if you say you are a Christian, you will be persecuted.

But one thing I am sure that all of us, in some way or the other, when we take decisions, life decisions, what is our priority? Maybe we can think about taking suffering. Do we take decisions based on what the world’s standards are or do we take decisions based on what is good for God’s kingdom? And I believe we need to do more and more. Whatever decisions I am taking, is it bringing glory to God? Am I able to serve god’s kingdom in some way? And I think that is something we could do, maybe in a small way or in a big way.

- One of the most important things in today’s context is we need to be caring people. We need to be loving. We need to be known as a church which cares, people who care for one another, who love one another and are united and caring for one another. This follows what I was sharing.
Ephesians 5: 15-20. But we’ll read only a few verses from that portion.
“¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

So this emphasizes what we said earlier. Be filled with the Spirit, be controlled by God's Spirit. And also, it says we need to speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. This aspect of giving to one another, encouraging one another building one another is very important.

We need to be a loving community, a loving people, caring people. This doesn't happen automatically; that's not in us by nature. By nature, we are all selfish people. But we need to be intentional and God's Spirit can do that in us.

John 13:34-35 ³⁴ A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have love you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Jesus has given a sure test here, that when we love one another as Jesus loved us, the whole world will know that we are Jesus' disciples. That's Jesus' promise.

John 17:20-23 This is Jesus' high priestly prayer.

²⁰ "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – ²³ I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

So this portion again underlines the importance of unity and it says the world will know.

So in conclusion as being witnesses, we looked at three aspects:

- We need to be led by the Spirit. Without that there is nothing; we are of no use. We need to be led on a day-to-day basis.
- God's fruit of the Spirit will be evident in all. It's God's Spirit's job to bring that fruit in us day by day.
- We also say Apostle Paul's instructions to Timothy, how we need to fan into flame the gifts which God has given us. And how we should never be ashamed or scared; we should suffer for the gospel.
- We need to be loving one another and a caring community, and Jesus promised, then the whole world will know that we are Jesus' disciples.

Amen.
