FOUNDATIONS OF THE FAITH
Acts 2:1–36

Notes on the Text

Acts 2:1

- Pentecost, from the Greek word for "fiftieth," was the Feast of Weeks. It was counted fifty days from the offering of the firstfruits sheaf during Passover week (Leviticus 23:15–16).
- Why did the Spirit come at Pentecost? Several reasons stand out.
- First, Pentecost was one of the three pilgrim feasts at which every Jewish man was to appear before the Lord (Deuteronomy 16:16). It was the first such feast after Jesus' resurrection, and it filled Jerusalem with Jews from many parts of the world. It was a fitting place to begin Christ's mission to the nations.
- Second, Pentecost was the feast of the wheat harvest, when the firstfruits were offered to the Lord (Exodus 34:22; Leviticus 23:17). Jesus had told His disciples that the harvest was plentiful (Matthew 9:37–38). The three thousand who believe on this day (Acts 2:41) are the first fruits of His harvest.
- Third, there is likely a connection to Mount Sinai. After the Passover, the Lord delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt. In the third month they came to Sinai (Exodus 19:1), where the Lord appeared in fire, smoke, and a great sound and gave them the law. In the same way, Jesus has delivered His people from bondage to sin through His Passover, and now the Spirit comes with sound and fire to form a new covenant people.
- Jewish tradition eventually came to associate Pentecost with the giving of the law at Sinai.
- The parallels between Sinai and the events surrounding Pentecost are worth tracing:

Sinai (Exodus)	Jesus and the Church (Gospels and Acts)
The covenant is ratified in blood, and the people answer, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do” (24:3–8).	At the Last Supper, Jesus says, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20).
Moses, Aaron, and the elders eat a covenant meal in God’s presence (24:9–11).	The risen Jesus appears to the apostles and eats with them over forty days (Luke 24:41–43; Acts 1:3–4).
Moses goes up the mountain for forty days and receives what will order Israel’s worship and life (24:12–18).	For forty days Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God and the promise of the Spirit (Acts 1:3–5).
Moses enters the cloud, and the glory of the LORD appears like a devouring fire (24:15–18).	Jesus is taken up, and a cloud receives Him out of their sight (Acts 1:9–11).
Israel waits at the foot of the mountain (24:14; 32:1).	The disciples wait in Jerusalem, devoted to prayer (Acts 1:12–14).
The LORD descends with fire, smoke, and a very loud trumpet blast (19:16–19).	A sound from heaven like a mighty rushing wind, and tongues as of fire (Acts 2:2–3).
The law is spoken (20:1–17) and written on tablets of stone (31:18).	The Spirit is given, fulfilling the promise of the law written on the heart (Acts 2:4; Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:27; 2 Corinthians 3:3).
About three thousand fall under judgment (32:28).	About three thousand are added and receive life, a reversal of Sinai (Acts 2:41).
Israel makes the golden calf and calls its feast “a feast to the LORD,” worshiping the true God under a false image (32:1–6).	Jerusalem’s leaders reject Jesus, and Stephen later ties their unbelief directly to the calf (Acts 7:39–53).
The unbelieving generation is given forty years to die in the wilderness (Numbers 14:33–34).	“This generation” bears the verdict (Matthew 24:34; Luke 21:20–24, 32; compare Acts 2:40), and Jerusalem falls in AD 70, about forty years after the crucifixion.

- The order of events is not identical. In Exodus, the theophany and the giving of the law (chapters 19–20) come before the covenant meal and the forty days (chapter 24), and Moses enters the cloud at the beginning of his forty days rather than at the end. The pattern is thematic rather than strictly sequential.

Acts 2:2

- Scripture often connects the Spirit and presence of God with wind. The Hebrew word *ruach* (and the Greek *pneuma*) can mean wind, breath, or spirit. Like the Spirit, the wind is invisible, yet it animates and gives life (John 3:8; Ezekiel 37:9–14).
- In the beginning, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters (Genesis 1:2), and God breathed the breath of life into man (Genesis 2:7). The heavens were made by the word of the Lord and the breath of His mouth (Psalm 33:6).
- In the same way, the Spirit now begins a work of new creation. He gives new life to God's people, and the making of the new heavens and new earth has begun. As in Genesis 1, this new creation comes about through speaking, that is, through the preaching of the gospel.

Acts 2:3

- Luke says the tongues were "as of fire." They looked like fire, but they were a visible sign of the Spirit's presence rather than ordinary fire. Like the burning bush, they did not consume what they rested on (Exodus 3:2).
- John the Baptist had promised that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3:16; see the note on 1:5).

- Fire is like a tongue in that it devours and consumes. A flame licks out at the air around it. Isaiah speaks of fire devouring stubble with the Hebrew image of a “tongue of fire” (Isaiah 5:24).
- In Scripture, fire can also speak. The Lord called to Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3:2–4), and He spoke to Israel out of the midst of the fire at Sinai (Deuteronomy 4:12, 36). Now tongues of fire rest on God’s people, and they begin to speak His words.

Acts 2:4

- What were they saying? Luke tells us in verse 11. They were declaring the mighty works of God, and each hearer heard them in his own language.

Acts 2:5

- These were Jews of the dispersion, whose people had been scattered among the nations since the exiles.
- Luke calls them devout. Some had traveled to Jerusalem for the feast, while others had come from abroad to settle in the city. Verse 10 also mentions proselytes, Gentiles who had converted to Judaism.

Acts 2:7

- The crowd recognized the speakers as Galileans. These men had no natural way of speaking in all these varied languages.

Acts 2:9–11

- Luke’s list of nations recalls the scattering of the nations at Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). Many interpreters also hear an echo of the Table of Nations that comes just before it (Genesis 10).

- At Babel, the Lord came down, confused the language of mankind, and scattered the nations over the face of the earth. At Pentecost, the Spirit comes down, and the nations, gathered in Jerusalem, hear God speak to them in their own languages.
- Luke even uses Babel's vocabulary. When he says the crowd was "bewildered" (v. 6), he uses the same verb the Greek translation of the Old Testament uses for the Lord confusing the language at Babel (Genesis 11:7, 9).
- The builders of Babel set out to reach heaven and "make a name for ourselves" (Genesis 11:4). Now Christ has ascended to heaven, and from there He sends the Spirit down. Salvation comes not by making a name for ourselves but by calling on the name of the Lord (v. 21).
- Pentecost does not erase the variety of languages. Each man hears the mighty works of God "in our own tongues" (v. 11). The gospel does not abolish the nations but gathers them into one people, as John later sees a great multitude "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" worshiping before the throne (Revelation 7:9).
- At this point the hearers are still Jews and proselytes. Pentecost is a foretaste. The full ingathering of the Gentile nations unfolds later in Acts (Acts 10:44–47; 13:46–48).

Acts 2:12

- "What does this mean?" It means that God intends to take His gospel and His kingdom to the four corners of the earth.

Acts 2:16

- Peter answers the question on everyone's mind: What is happening? What they are seeing is the fulfillment of prophecy. The last days have arrived.

- He quotes Joel 2:28–32, where the Lord promises to pour out His Spirit in connection with the coming day of the Lord. Where Joel says "afterward," Peter says, "in the last days" (v. 17), interpreting the prophecy as he applies it.
- Joel's promise answers the wish Moses expressed in the wilderness: "Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29).
- Throughout the Old Testament, the Spirit came upon particular people for particular offices and tasks, such as prophets, priests, kings, and judges. Now He is poured out on all of God's covenant people: sons and daughters, young and old, even servants (vv. 17–18).
- The "last days" also point to the end of the old covenant age, which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70. Pentecost inaugurates those last days.

Acts 2:19–20

- Pentecost marks the beginning of the "last days," the final era before the Lord restores all things (Acts 3:21). We live in this era, the final phase of God's redemptive plan. Joel foresaw it, and Pentecost shows that it had begun.
- In these two verses, Joel also foresees a time of judgment and upheaval. Blood, fire, smoke, and a darkened sun and moon are the Old Testament's language for war and the fall of nations (for example, Isaiah 13:9–10, spoken against Babylon).
- For those hearing Peter, such a judgment was already looming. Jesus had used the same imagery when He foretold the destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 24:29; see the note on 1:12), and it fell in AD 70.

- In a greater sense, there is still more to come. The day of the Lord will reach its final fulfillment at Christ's return and the last judgment.

For Discussion: Should the Church Expect a Tribulation That Ends Its Covenant?

- There will certainly be a great and final day of judgment at the resurrection (Acts 17:31; 2 Corinthians 5:10).
- But the day of the Lord that fell on Jerusalem in AD 70 was a covenant judgment. It brought the old covenant age to an end, as the law had warned would happen if Israel broke covenant (Deuteronomy 28:15, 49–52).
- The new covenant is different. It is a better covenant, and it will not be replaced (Hebrews 8:6–13). The church has received a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:26–28), and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). For those who are in Christ, there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1).
- If this is right, the church need not expect a great tribulation that ends its covenant, as Israel did at the close of its covenant age. Christians still suffer tribulation (John 16:33; Acts 14:22), but not the kind that brings the covenant itself to an end.
- At the same time, the Lord still disciplines His people (Hebrews 12:5–11; 1 Corinthians 11:30–32), and He can remove the lampstand of an unfaithful church (Revelation 2:5). as some churches have degenerated so far that they are no longer churches of Christ at all (Second London Confession 26.3). The Church as a whole will endure, but no local congregation is promised immunity from judgment.
- Christians hold differing views on this question, and many expect a future apostasy or great tribulation before Christ returns.

Acts 2:22

- Peter now explains what has brought about this event and made it possible. It is Jesus: His coming, His death, His resurrection, and His ascension.
- God attested Jesus "with mighty works and wonders and signs." Peter echoes the words of Joel he has just quoted, "wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below" (v. 19). The age of wonders and signs had already arrived in the ministry of Jesus.

Acts 2:23

- Two truths stand side by side. God sovereignly planned and foreknew the death of Jesus, and the men of Jerusalem bore real and direct responsibility for killing Him.
- They did it "by the hands of lawless men," that is, through the Gentile Roman authorities, yet the guilt was still theirs. God is sovereign, and man is responsible (compare Luke 22:22; Acts 4:27–28).

Acts 2:24

- Peter says that God raised Jesus, "loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it." Death is pictured here as a power that seized Jesus but could not keep Him.
- The word translated "pangs" commonly refers to the pains of childbirth. One way to read the image is that death itself went into labor the moment it received Jesus. It could not hold Him, and in raising Him the Father brought death's labor to an end as it gave birth to Jesus, "the firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18; Revelation 1:5).
- Others read the "pangs" as the agonies of death that Jesus suffered, from which God set Him free. Peter's language likely echoes the Psalms, where the psalmist speaks of the cords or pangs of death surrounding him (Psalm 18:4–5; 116:3).

- Either way, the point is clear. From the moment Jesus died, it was impossible for Him to remain dead. His resurrection was certain, and He burst forth from death when the Father raised Him.
- The same will be true for all who belong to Christ. Death holds the saints only for a time. At the resurrection, God will once again end death's hold as He raises us with Christ (1 Corinthians 15:20–23, 54–57). Praise God for that!

Acts 2:25

- Peter appeals to David and Psalm 16:8–11 to show that even Israel's beloved king foresaw the resurrection of the Christ.
- David died and was buried, and his tomb was still with them (v. 29), so the psalm could not ultimately be about David himself. As a prophet, David spoke of the resurrection of his greater Son (vv. 30–31).

Acts 2:32

- Peter has shown that Jesus was attested by God, put to death, and raised. Now he adds that the apostles are witnesses of the resurrection, which was the very qualification for apostleship in 1:21–22 and the calling given to them in 1:8.
- Next he will speak of the ascension.

Acts 2:33

- It is important that Jesus ascends and takes His seat at the right hand of God. He has received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, and He pours out the Spirit as He wills (compare John 15:26; 16:7).

- The commotion the crowd is witnessing is the work of the Spirit, poured out by the ascended Christ. This is the fulfillment of Daniel 7:13–14 (see the note on 1:9). The Son of Man has received His kingdom, and now He shares His power with His people.

Acts 2:34–35

- Peter quotes Psalm 110:1: "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."
- David did not ascend into the heavens, so he cannot be the one invited to sit at God's right hand. The "Lord" David speaks of must be someone greater than himself.
- This is the same argument Jesus made in the temple. If the Christ is David's son, how can David call Him Lord (Luke 20:41–44)? The Messiah is more than a mere earthly son of David.

Acts 2:36

- This is Peter's conclusion. The man Jesus, whom they crucified, is the one God has made both Lord and Christ. He is the Messiah Israel had long awaited.
- "Made" does not mean that Jesus became Lord for the first time at His ascension. As the eternal Son, He has always been Lord. Rather, God has publicly installed Him at His right hand and declared Him to be Lord and Christ (compare Romans 1:4).
- The title "Lord" carries great weight. Peter has just quoted Joel: "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (v. 21). In Joel, that name is Yahweh. Peter now gives the same title to Jesus.