

“Inviting the Scattered”

Reading: Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-13, 38-41

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The book of Acts is a book of action, a book of the movement of the church after its birth in which the Holy Spirit is the main character and the leader of everything that happens. It's here that we learn who we first were and we learn what sorts of things happen when a group of people are completely sold out to the mission of Jesus and completely filled with the Holy Spirit. The story of the birth of the church in Acts is crucial to our faith because it shows us that Jesus did not just die on the cross to forgive us of our sins; His death also broke the back of the kingdom of the world and allowed the kingdom of God to blaze into our reality. If you have responded to Christ, you have been forgiven of your sin *so that* you can be filled with the Spirit, and the Spirit is poured out on you *so that* you can take part in revealing the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth.

Last week we looked at the book of Joel because it's the prophecies of Joel that Peter turns to when he needs to explain what's going on when the Spirit arrives at Pentecost. Jesus had told His followers to wait because He would be sending power from God, but they didn't really understand what that meant. As these crowds are trying to grasp what they're seeing and hearing, Peter uses Joel's promise that one day God would pour out His Spirit on all people, and that outpouring would be a part of God's great work of making all things right. God had long ago promised that there would be a great king over His people who would rule over them as a good shepherd forever, and Peter explains to them how Jesus has filled that role beyond even what the great king David could have imagined.

The result, he tells them, is that the crucified man Jesus is in fact both Lord and Christ, God and Messiah, King and Savior. Therefore, Peter says, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Turn from your rejection of Christ, in other words, and be initiated into the gathered people of God, so that you might also receive this gift of the outpouring of the Spirit. And then he says a fantastic thing: “The promise is for you *and your children and for all who are far off* — for all whom the Lord our God will call.” There is something much greater taking place here than just a group of people miraculously speaking in languages they've never learned, amazing though that is. There's something much more powerful than just God giving people words that they can't understand themselves. There is something deeper taking place at this moment of birth of the church than just a bunch of Christians being amazed by an unexpected miracle.

To start to get a grip on what I mean, we need to cast our minds back to a time so long ago that it's almost forgotten. It's a story that is so old that we have trouble making sense of all the details. It's set in a time and place and culture so far removed from us today that it might as well be on another planet. It's popularly known as the story of the Tower of Babel, which we read from Genesis 11. If you grew up going to Sunday School you're probably so familiar with this story that it's hard to hear it with fresh ears; it's really a very provocative story. It takes place an indeterminate time after God has cleansed the world with a flood, and there really are no nations or cultures or governments yet that are anything like what we're used to. At that time, the story tells us, everyone spoke the same language, and they start to use the cutting-edge technology of baked bricks to build a great city. But part of their plan is to build a massive tower “so that we may make a name for

ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” They’re using their God-given minds, in other words, to build something as a monument to their own pride and as an affront to God. Maybe they remember the story of that flood, and they want to show whatever gods are up there that humans are no pushovers.

Some people would say that this is just an interesting, quaint old story explaining why there are different languages in the world today, because of course God decides to confound their united defiance of Him by confusing their languages. But this very old story shows us something living deep in human society. We see on the one hand how easy it is for people to unite in activities that oppose God and His kingdom, and at the same time we see the scattering that so often results. So often it takes so little effort to convince people to do things that run counter to what God desires, it is so natural for us to act based on things like pride or selfishness or fear or spite, and then those very things so quickly lead to divisions and pain and separation and scattering.

We could look at another example in the history of God’s people, another Tower of Babel, in a sense, that came many years later. God had gathered His chosen people of Israel together in the land He had promised them, and He had chosen to dwell among them as their God, but the people chose, generation after generation, to do the things contrary to what He had called them. They did not take care of the poor and vulnerable in their midst, and they did not worship the Lord alone as their God. And so after warning them time and again, God scattered them across the world. Their homeland was conquered and they became refugees and exiles.

Any one of us could tell our own stories of exile and scattering. Your home may not have been conquered by a marauding army and you might not have had your language inexplicably confused by God, but you have experienced or you know people either personally or from a distance who have suffered from being scattered. You know the pain that can result from a person or group of people who choose to act in such a way that opposes God, who through their pride or their selfishness or through the influence of others have been scattered far from the fold of God. You know the damage that can be done on a personal and global level when someone turns their back on God. Pain and death are what result when we are scattered from the One who is the source of life and healing.

But though it is painful to think of those who are scattered from God’s family, it is equally beautiful to see what happens at Pentecost. The God who was forced to check humanity’s pride by confusing our languages at the Tower of Babel is here pouring out Himself upon His church so that His family can miraculously speak the languages of those who have been scattered. The God who sent the exiles to the far corners of the world as refugees is giving them words they can understand to invite them to become full members of His family. Those who were scattered after uniting under the banner of humanity at war with God are being called together to gather under the banner of Jesus Christ.

Just as the events of Pentecost are deeply rooted in the long history of what God had been doing with His people, so we should not be surprised that God uses the birth of the church to call out to the scattered. At Pentecost, Peter told that bewildered crowd that this promise of the gift of the Spirit is not restricted to just a few special people who are near God, this promise is also “for all who are far off.” Maybe you remember the parable Jesus told of a shepherd who loses one out of a hundred of his sheep, and how that shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to go in search of that one lost sheep and rejoices greatly when the lost one is found, just as there is rejoicing in heaven when a lost

person turns to God. Or there's the time Jesus was explaining to His followers that He is the good shepherd who will lay down His life for the sheep, and in fact His flock is bigger than any of them realize — He has sheep in another pen who will be invited as well.

And so Peter's message to that crowd at Pentecost is that the church has reason to praise God in every language imaginable, because God has, in effect, provided a way to reverse the Tower of Babel. People who are scattered and divided and wounded by the effects of human rebellion can now be brought back together under Jesus Christ, and He sends His Holy Spirit to mark them each as His own. That makes us unlike anything else in the world: not only is the church made up of sinners who have become saints, not only is the church made up of scattered people from every imaginable background and culture and status who are united in Christ, but we are also the only family in the world who is motivated to speak the language of the scattered. It's part of our family motto, so to speak, that we exist to praise God in such a way that the scattered might be gathered with us. We're a family that is recruiting. Just like our spiritual ancestors in the book of Acts never stopped moving, we also are called to center our actions on gathering the scattered people of the world, praying for them, loving them, speaking the hope of God into their lives in their language because we are marked by the Spirit.

And so we celebrate and we ache. We celebrate what God has done here in our lives and in our church family, where God has called us to repentance and He has empowered us for His service and He has united us in His Spirit, different though we are. But we also ache because we know that there are so many who are still scattered. And we love them. And they're not coming to us; they're just continuing to scatter. And so we ask for God's guidance in how we can speak their language to communicate God's invitation to them.



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