

All you need to know about Pentecost

(1) **What Is Pentecost?** The word 'Pentecost' comes from the Greek; it simply means 'fiftieth'. Pentecost Sunday ends the season of Easter; it's the Sabbath day after a week's worth of weeks ($7 \times 7 = 49 + 1 = 50$). Pentecost grew from what was originally a festival marking the first grain harvest of the Middle Eastern year, marked by a sacrifice to the gods from the first part of that first harvest. In very ancient Palestine, this **first-fruit** sacrifice was associated with the pagan gods of power and fertility. But as the Jews grew to understand themselves as followers of the one and only true God, they created ways to be thankful to the Lord for the first harvest - without any pagan trappings.

This celebration became a mini-pilgrimage, where they would stay at their region's place of worship, bringing with them grain loaves and young livestock for sacrifices. However, after the Jewish kings centralised religious activity this pilgrimage was relocated to Jerusalem, with all the pageantry that Jerusalem did so well. Pentecost (Shavu'ot) was the celebration of a blessing of harvest, and its **joy** was symbolised by 'leavening' the bread. Therefore, **joy** is the main expression of Pentecost!

(2) **What happened on the day of Pentecost?** Let's fast-forward to Jesus' time. *"And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were...And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit..."* (Acts 2:1-5) During the Last Supper on the night before he dies, Jesus promises the disciples that God the Father will send the **Holy Spirit** to dwell among them. Several weeks later just before His Ascension, the now risen Christ assures them that the Spirit will arrive soon. A few days later in Jerusalem on the Jewish feast of Pentecost He makes good on His promise. This happens in the same Upper Room where the Last Supper occurred - as the disciples, still confused and frightened over the crucifixion, wait and pray for the promised coming of the Spirit. Their prayers are answered in spectacular fashion, like something out of a Steven Spielberg movie. A mighty wind from the sky with thunderous sound sweeps through the room shaking the rafters; tongues of fire appear, they part and come to rest on each of their heads. And suddenly they are **filled** with the Holy Spirit – an overwhelming manifestation of God's presence.

On the morning of **Pentecost**, ignited by the Holy Spirit, they came out of the room and started to tell everyone they met about Jesus. The streets were full of people from many different regions, mostly there for the holy day, some still hanging around from the Passover. When each of them heard these witnesses speak, they heard it in their own language! (That is, if they were allowing themselves to listen; otherwise, all they heard was babbling, as shown by the remarks about drunkenness.) What was being proclaimed, for the first time in full form, was the **good news** of Jesus Christ and what it means for all people. Yet, what marked this occasion was the undeniable fact that the words being spoken were delivered with power and authority into the hearts of those who were listening. About 3000 new people became followers of Christ. They were the "first fruits" of a new kind of harvest – a harvest brought about by the Holy Spirit's fresh **presence**.
Birthed in the spirit, by the Spirit!

(3) **How is the Holy Spirit's presence different now?** Pentecost was not the first time the Holy Spirit was active. The Spirit had been working in Old Testament times, with people who were obedient and sensitive to

His promptings - giving them guidance, teaching, shedding light on the mysteries of life, and causing prophecies to come forth. Also, the Spirit was conspicuous in John the Baptist's message, and He came in full strength upon Jesus at the water baptism, which began the Lord's public ministry. Jesus was a man who was overflowing with the Spirit, and it showed in whatever He did. What's more, John's Gospel implies that Jesus had breathed the Spirit onto each of His disciples before leaving. So what was so different about Pentecost? It was the first time that the Holy Spirit "descended upon" believers as a group or "body" - and He came to stay! It was the first time the Spirit's awesome power was available to anyone, not just the Twelve! Before, they were only another small circle of people following a leader around; now, they had become **the Church**, an entity that would eventually be measured in billions. The difference? The arrival of the Holy Spirit in force, to join them together.

(4) **What is the central message of Pentecost?** True, the message of Pentecost is the Holy Spirit's coming, but there's another striking image of the Holy Spirit and His ministry that comes from the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a Jew in exile after Babylon has conquered and scattered his people. Earlier Ezekiel had asked, *'how then can we live?'* For without God providing "life", life has no life in it! So God tells Ezekiel to speak to a field of dead bones, and he does. Then something really weird happens; the bones come together, then muscles, joints, skin, eyes, even facial hairs. Real, whole bodies form. Created from the spoken Word. Yet they are still dead! Then, Ezekiel speaks again at God's command, calling on the wind for the "breath" to go into the dead bodies, to make them alive. Notice, it's the breath of God (His Spirit) that makes all life live. The message of Pentecost is that the **Breath** that makes life 'live' has been sent to dwell among us! Through Jesus Christ, and the Spirit He sent, is death ultimately dead, but life becomes more fully alive - it becomes more abundant!

(5) **Where do you fit in this ongoing Pentecost?** If you believe in Jesus Christ, then you're a part of that called-together group, something much bigger than you are. Being a part of it means you have the **Holy Spirit** at work in you. And, that means you have tasks that the Lord wants you to do, and you have been equipped with what ever it takes to do them. Yes, the liberating, empowering spiritual event of Pentecost was the first fruit of something that continues to this day, and beyond. Some of you may be wondering about this kind of experience - you may find it strange, intriguing, or perhaps just puzzling. But God intends that you be part of it too.

You are not the 120 from the upper room; however, you are like the people who were in the crowd that Pentecost day. Some 3000 of those in the crowd changed the course of their lives for eternity. A few grumbled, some debated it among themselves, and probably most of the people in Jerusalem didn't even notice. They went on with their daily grind. No divine power hit their lives. There was no fresh purpose to give them new direction, and so many of them, even the devout ones, still could not sense the presence and power of God.

Pentecost holds the promise that God has something **fresh**, something new in store. Those believers from that first Pentecost day kept their faith, and kept living life His way. And as a result, many more would find the promise that Jesus gave fulfilled in their lives. Many more would be set ablaze by the Holy Spirit! You can make a difference to those around you because you carry the same **message** - the Good News!

(6) **What is the Spirit of Pentecost?** The supernatural outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost dramatically transformed the disciples. Along with the wind and fire came various **spiritual gifts**. The gifts of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding dispelled their confusion and revealed the truth about God; the gift of courage dissolved their fears. These, and other gifts, empowered them to preach the Good News with authority; to perform miracles in Jesus' name; to witness, prophesy; and speak in other tongues. Peter, who denied Him three times, finally finds his courage and becomes a dynamic preacher and fearless leader of the fledgling community. Others who abandoned Jesus on Good Friday also perform heroically, beyond their wildest dreams. Two thousand years later, the same Spirit is alive and active; still **empowering** believers as before. So don't sell yourself short. You and the Spirit can work miracles too, just like our ancestors in the faith did after Pentecost.

(7) **How Is Pentecost Celebrated?** In the English tradition, the day is sometimes known as Whitsunday. This refers to the white robes of those "baptised" on this day. Perhaps you will be baptised in the Spirit this Pentecost Sunday (today), just like the first Christians who gave birth to the early church. Consequently, we ought to be **joyful** and celebrate the "first-fruits", but we should also celebrate the 'baptisms'. But more than that, we must commemorate the Spirit of Life that Jesus sent in His place, and use the gifts that His Spirit has given us to build each other up, strengthen the church as a whole, and change the society in which we live. Pentecost is not a solemn occasion. It's a time for vigour, excitement, energy, movement, new birth, fresh vision and fresh commitment.

This is what Pentecost is all about! It is truly super-natural!