

Acts 2:1-13 describes the beginning of the Day of Pentecost - the day that the exalted Lord Jesus Christ poured out the Holy Spirit upon the church. That was quite a day for the people who were there. Jesus had ascended into heaven. He had told his followers to wait for him to send them the Holy Spirit who would give them the power to fulfill his mission for them – namely to be witness for him throughout the whole world beginning at Jerusalem and going outward from there. So they waited - gathering together and praying - and then it happened. They heard the sound of a mighty rushing wind. Divided tongues of fire appeared to them and rested on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues.

A larger group gathered and the core group of disciples were speaking of the mighty works of God in multiple languages so that the great variety of people who had gathered at Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost all heard the disciples witnessing in their own language. We don't know exactly what that looked like. I would imagine that the people separated into groups according to their language and the ones upon whom the Holy Spirit had come were witnessing about Jesus to groups in their own language.

But then Peter got up and preached a sermon. And Luke gives us a summary of that sermon. And no doubt this sermon gives the gist of the message that all the other disciples were preaching on that day. Peter is standing with the other eleven apostles and so we can say that Peter's message was the summary of apostolic teaching. Peter addresses the mockers who interpreted what was going on as the effects of too much wine. And then he explains what is really going on. He does it by quoting from the OT – a passage from the prophet Joel. And he says that what the people were witnessing was the fulfillment of this prophecy that Joel had given hundreds of years earlier.

Joel had written, "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophecy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams even on my male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy."

Peter quotes these words from Joel to explain what was going on. He is saying that what was going on, on the day of Pentecost, was the fulfillment of this prophecy. What was going on is described concisely in verse 4, "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance." Peter is saying that this is the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy.

Now if you look at the first part of the quotation from Joel carefully, you will see that what Joel is saying is that all of God's people will be prophets. That is the gist of this first part of Joel's prophecy. God will pour out his Spirit on all of his people and they shall all become prophets – sons and daughters – young men and old men – male servants and female servants – they will all prophesy. This is all about prophecy. God spoke to the prophets through dreams and visions and the prophets brought God's message to the people.

In OT times, not every Israelite was a prophet. Only small number of them were. The Holy Spirit came upon those select people and through dreams and visions and other means he brought them the word of the Lord and the prophets spoke the word of the Lord to the people. The big change that Joel predicted was that in the last days God was going to pour out his Spirit on all of his people and they would all be prophets. That was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost and what it looked like was that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (verse 4)

Now if you put the Joel’s prophecy and its fulfillment side by side, you will notice that the fulfillment is not exactly the same as the prophecy. We do not read of anyone having visions or dreams. There are a few visions later on in the book of Acts, but not many. We certainly do not see all the followers of Jesus having visions and dreams on the day of Pentecost and beyond. There are a few people called prophets later on in the book of Acts, but they were not very prominent. And even tongue speaking was not very prominent after the day of Pentecost.

This helps us to see that the fulfillment of prophecy often does not look exactly like the prophecy. There are points of connection, but the fulfillment does not look exactly the same as the prophecy. And so we need to follow the interpretation of the apostles – like Peter here – to understand what the fulfillment of prophecy looks like. And the interpretation that Peter gives to the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy is the Holy Spirit filling all of Jesus followers and all of them speaking in different languages. And what they were speaking about were the mighty works of God. Verse 11 – the people say – “we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” That was the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy. All of the believers were speaking of the mighty works of God in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The key point of Joel’s prophecy is that in the last days all of God’s people will be prophets. They will all receive the Holy Spirit and they will all be prophets. We need to ask the question of how all of God’s people were prophets in the rest of the NT. Certainly on the day of Pentecost, all of the initial group of believers spoke in tongues, but it is certainly not the case that all of God’s people in the rest of the NT spoke in tongues. And they were certainly not all prophets in the sense of bringing new revelation.

The way that all of Jesus’ followers are prophets is that they are all called and equipped to speak God’s word to others. Here is how one scholar puts it, “The act of prophesying in Acts 2 ... must be understood within the context of what Peter says in his quotation from Joel. That is, that there is a broader sense of the word in which all of God’s people ‘prophesy’. In contrast to the work of the Spirit in the OT when the Holy Spirit empowered only certain people, prophets, to mediate God’s word to the people, now all of God’s people are able to speak for God.” (A.J. Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus*, p.132)

The essence of prophecy is bringing God’s message to people. In the OT that meant bringing new revelation from God to the people. But when on and after the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit equipped all of God’s people to be prophets, he did not give new revelation them. The apostles brought new revelation which they

mostly did by being the inspired interpreters of the existing revelation of the OT in the light of Jesus and what he had done and taught. But the sense in which all of God's people were prophets is that they brought the existing word of God to other people in much the same way that Peter did it in this sermon. Peter was one of the 12 apostles. The teaching of the apostles had a special authority because Jesus had called them to be the designated interpreters of himself and his mission. But even Peter's sermon is based in on OT passages. Those who were not apostles would fulfill their role as prophets, not by bringing new revelation but by bringing apostolic teaching – the message of Jesus as interpreted by the apostles.

We see this worked out in the rest of Acts and in the rest of the NT. It's true that much of the communication of the word of God happens through apostles and preachers in the NT, but there is also a significant place for all believers to fulfill their calling to be prophets. In Acts 4, there is a story about the church at prayer in connection with the persecution of Peter and John by the Jewish leaders. And 4:31 says, "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness." This too was in fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. In chapter 8 we read of a "great persecution against the church in Jerusalem." And verse 4 of chapter 8 says, "Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word." This is another instance of believers not in leadership positions fulfilling the office of prophet by bringing the word of God to the people.

To see what this looks like in more detail we will consider a few verses from the rest of the NT. First we see from 1 John 2:20 that the Holy Spirit gives knowledge. "But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge." In Romans 15:14 Paul writes, "I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another." This is part of the prophetic calling of every believer. It's not that we all have theology degrees but we are all equipped by the Holy Spirit to bring the word of God to others to some degree. Even those who are newly converted can speak to others about what God has taught them from his word and so be prophets.

Think about what Jesus said about the least in the kingdom of heaven being greater than John the Baptist. Matthew 11:11, Jesus says, "Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." By the term "kingdom of heaven" here Jesus is speaking about the fact that God was establishing his kingdom through him and so those who belong to the kingdom of heaven are his followers and it was on the day of Pentecost that the followers of Jesus received the power of the kingdom that made them greater than John the Baptist. Jesus is pointing out the difference between the OT period and the period that would see the fruit of his saving work – a period which began at Pentecost. John the Baptist was a great prophet. But he was a "before-Pentecost-prophet". After Pentecost all believers were equipped to be prophets by the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. And because of that even the weakest believer is able to witness to Jesus in a way that even John the Baptist never could. That is why the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist.

So every time the NT speaks to all believers encouraging them to bring the word of God, it is speaking about what they are able to do because they are anointed by the Holy Spirit to be prophets. So we have a verse like 1 Thessalonians 5:14, where Paul writes, “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.” The main way that we do those things is to speak God’s word into one another’s lives. Hebrews 3:13 says, “But exhort one another every day” This is part of what we are equipped to do by the Holy Spirit who was poured out on all of the people of God on the day of Pentecost. The day of Pentecost was the day when all of God’s people were equipped to be prophets – to bring the word of God to the world and to one another. As the NT makes very clear, there is an important role for those whom God has called to be leaders in the church. But it is also very clear that God has called and equipped all of his people to participate in the prophetic task to speak the Word of God both to fellow believers and to the world.

From the context of the book of Acts we must understand this ministry as the ongoing work of Christ by his Spirit through his people. Remember that in the first verse of the book of Acts, Luke has made it clear that this book is his account of what Jesus continued to do and teach. He says that in his Gospel, which we call the Gospel according to Luke, he “dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach” and he implies by that, that what he describes in the book of Acts is what Jesus did and taught after his ascension into heaven. We are to understand this point about the Holy Spirit being poured out on all of his disciples making them all prophets in that perspective. Jesus from his throne in heaven continues his prophetic ministry through the Holy Spirit who equips all of Jesus’ followers to be prophets.

This helps us to see the great significance of all the different ways that we can speak the word of God into one another’s lives – when we witness to someone who is not saved – when we teach one another in bible studies – when parents teach their children – when we send a card with a text in it – when we warn a brother or sister who is going down a sinful path – when we encourage one another in the Lord. Quoting Peter who is quoting Joel we can say “[T]his is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: ‘And in the last days ... I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh ... and they shall prophesy....’” We are equipped to do this by the Holy Spirit. But at the same time we must see it as our calling. One of the things that Jesus is calling and equipping us to do is to be prophets – to speak for God into other people’s lives.

I want to say something now about the terms “last days” and “the day of the Lord” that we see in Peter’s quotation from the prophecy of Joel. By quoting these verses from Joel and saying that they were being fulfilled by what was happening on the day of Pentecost, Peter was saying that the last days had begun. The sign that the last days had begun was the pouring out of God’s Spirit on all flesh.

The term “last days” and a number of similar terms, including the day of the Lord are used in the OT to refer to the time when God will act in a decisive way to bring both salvation and judgment through the Son of David. Many of the references to that day are warnings of God coming in judgement. For instance, Isaiah 13:13,

“Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the LORD of hosts **in the day** of his fierce anger.” But there are also many that are promises of salvation in OT terms. Jeremiah 23:5-6 “Behold, the days are coming’, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”

Here is a summary description of the hope of the OT based on promises of what will happen during the last days or on that day or similar expressions. It comes from Thomas Schreiner’s NT Theology. Schreiner is speaking about Jesus’ teaching that the kingdom of God was at hand, but what that meant was the same as what was promised for the last days. Jesus summed up the OT hope by the term kingdom of God. Schreiner writes, “Those hearing Jesus ... understood him to be proclaiming the dawn of a new glorious era in which Israel would be exalted and the nations made subservient to Israel’s God. The Lord would reign over the whole earth, the son of David would serve as king, and the exile would be over. The new covenant would be fulfilled, God’s people would keep his law and the promised new creation would become a reality. The Lord would pour out his Spirit on all flesh, and the promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed, to the ends of the earth, would become a reality.” (p. 45)

Part of that promise had to do with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Isaiah 44:3, “For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.” So all of this is included in the term “last days” as Joel uses it in his prophecy. And Peter is saying that what happened on the day of Pentecost was the beginning of the last days – the whole OT picture.

Now we should not think of the beginning of the last days as only on the day of Pentecost. The beginning of the last days was the whole period from the birth of Jesus to the day of Pentecost. Think of the following language from the song of Zechariah in connection with Jesus’ conception. Luke 1:68-70, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of the holy prophets from of old....” So the last days begin with Jesus and his mission. We do not have to be too precise about the exact day. The great point to be made is that the last days begin with Jesus and that includes Pentecost.

The point is that we are living in the last days. We are living in the days of the fulfillment of the great promises of the OT. And a huge part of what that means is that Jesus has died, risen and ascended into heaven and has poured out his Spirit upon his people.

But not all of the prophecies concerning the last days have been fulfilled. And we see that in the latter part of Peter’s quotation from Joel. Acts 2:19-20, “And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.” These verses refer to the ending of the last

days. You see the OT prophets saw the last days or the day of the Lord as one great event – God coming in salvation and judgment. What they did not see was that there would be a long period of time between the beginning of the last days and the very last day. But that is what we see in the light of the fulfillment that we read about in the NT. Many of the prophecies have been fulfilled in Jesus and what he accomplished. But much of what the prophets spoke about is yet to be fulfilled. What has been fulfilled is extremely significant and wonderful. Think of all that blessings that we have in Christ including the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And yet there is still so much more to come both in terms of the consummation of our salvation and in terms of God’s judgment upon those who refuse to come to Jesus.

So as we think about what we have already received in terms of the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy, namely the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit, we are reminded that not all the promises and not all the warnings have been fulfilled.

There is still the day of the Lord to come. And that will be a day of cosmic upheaval. John in Revelation gives a similar description of the last day Revelation 6:12-14, “When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”

Why does Peter include these verses about the cosmic upheaval of the day of the Lord in his quotation from Joel about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Clearly, he felt that he should not separate the first part of Joel’s quotation about salvation from the last part of Joel’s quote about the frightening signs that will mark the day of the Lord. What the total quote does is to place our prophetic ministry in the light of the sobering reality of the final day. Our task to speak the word of God to others takes place in the light of the coming day of the Lord. The issues at stake are momentous. We are God’s spokesmen both to one another and to the world in a context where we are moving every closer to the day of the Lord. This is serious business. How people respond to the word is a matter of eternal life and eternal death.

But the message that we are to bring is a message of salvation for those who will heed it. That is the last verse that Peter quotes from Joel. Verse 21, “And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

We are equipped by the Holy Spirit to be prophets. And the prophetic message is a message of salvation for those who turn to the Lord and a message of judgment for those do refuse him. But Jesus’ desire is that those who hear the message may heed it and call upon him for salvation. Jesus came that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. And that is our message to the world, but also to one another. We need the comforts of the gospel and we need the warnings that are the context in which the gospel is heard. The day of the Lord is coming. And “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”