

Falling Fire  
Acts 10:23-48

Pentecost: our responsive reading tells about a mighty rushing wind and tongues of fire resting on faithful followers of Christ, empowering them to speak the truth with boldness and clarity. Have you ever wanted something like that to happen? On that first Pentecost Sunday, thousands of people came to faith in Christ. Have you ever wanted a revival like that to break out around here?

Well, if today's passage teaches us nothing else, it's that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit wasn't a one-time experience. Something very like the first Pentecost happened in Acts chapter 8 when the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit after the preaching of Philip, a faithful deacon. And in today's passage, we see the Holy Spirit poured out even on the Gentiles, something that amazed the Jewish believers in verse 45.

But such outpourings weren't just limited to Bible times. American historians tell of the First and Second Great Awakenings, during which revival spread across this whole nation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the late 1850's, a group of laymen in New York City were praying for revival, and a great movement of the Spirit began, eventually spreading through both armies during the Civil War.

So, what does it take for a revival to break out? What has to happen before the Holy Spirit falls on multitudes, transforming their lives and their culture? Perhaps if we take a closer look at this passage, we can find out. But fair warning – we may not like everything we see.

For in the first place, Cornelius shows us that many of the things that we think would put us in a right relationship with God – well, they just aren't enough. After all, we might think that God would be sufficiently impressed with our good works or our gifts to the Church to pour out His Spirit on us. And at the beginning of this chapter, we read that Cornelius was exactly that sort of guy – a devout man, a man who feared God, a man who gave alms to the Jewish people, a man of prayer. So, surely that would mean Cornelius deserved to receive God's blessings, right?

Except that he doesn't seem to think so – why else would verse 25 tell us that he fell at Peter's feet? And if all it took to be acceptable in God's sight was to fear God and to do good things, then why hadn't the Holy Spirit already fallen on Cornelius back at the beginning of chapter 10, when he was already doing these sorts of things? Why did Cornelius have to wait for Peter to show up in order to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit?

So, it must take more than just good deeds to enter into the close fellowship with God that is characterized by the presence of God's Spirit. And sure enough, verse 36 says that Jesus Christ has to come into the picture. That's why Cornelius couldn't be saved by just going to the synagogue and praying and giving gifts to the poor. First, Peter had to come and preach Jesus to him.

But what was it specifically that Cornelius needed to know? Did he need to learn more of Jesus' teachings? That's the part of Jesus' life and ministry that most people recognize and that practically everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike, admits is useful and valuable, at

least in part. Even many atheists admit that society works better and that life in general would be much more pleasant if we would all live according to the golden rule, for example.

But as important and valuable as Jesus' teachings are, Peter doesn't even mention them in today's passage. And of course, many of Jesus' enemies had heard Him teaching, even though they didn't agree with much of what He said. No, just believing that Jesus is a great teacher, or even studying His teachings or agreeing with them isn't enough to be in right relationship with God. It isn't enough to make the fire of the Holy Spirit fall.

So, what did Cornelius need to learn about Jesus? If it wasn't the teachings of Christ, perhaps it was something about the mighty miracles that Jesus did, the healings, the casting out of demons. Now, all those things are surely important, but in verses 37 and 38 Peter seems to indicate that they were pretty much common knowledge.

And that of course makes sense, when we realize that Caesarea, where Cornelius lived, was only as far from Jesus' hometown as Vicksburg is from Port Gibson. There's no way that a man feeding a crowd of thousands or healing lepers or raising people from the dead would go unnoticed. Of course word about him would have already been published, proclaimed throughout all Judea, as Peter says.

And that means that many of Jesus' enemies also knew about His miracles. Many had even witnessed these miracles. For example, Jesus healed a man who had a withered hand in the middle of a group of Pharisees. Later in His ministry, His enemies saw Lazarus alive after Jesus had raised him from the dead. But Jesus' miraculous power just hardened them that much more against Him, made them that much more determined to kill him. No, just believing that Jesus did mighty miracles isn't enough to be in right relationship with God. It isn't enough to make the fire fall.

So let's go a bit further. In verse 39, Peter makes it clear that even though Jesus' enemies had heard His teachings and had seen His miracles, they murdered Him, they crucified Him. So just believing in Jesus' crucifixion isn't enough to bring someone into a right relationship with God either. For after they crucified Jesus, His enemies thought He was just another dead loser, another lying false prophet Who had been thrown on the ash-heap of history. No, just believing in Jesus' death isn't enough to make the fire fall.

So, if Cornelius' good works weren't enough, and if it wasn't enough for him to know about Jesus' teachings or about His miracles or about His death on the cross, what did he need to know? What was it that he needed for Peter to tell him? We find the key in verses 40 and 41 – he needed to hear the testimony of an apostle like Peter because the apostles were eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.

Moreover, Peter didn't just see Jesus after He was raised from the dead. No, verse 41 makes it plain that he and the rest of the apostles ate and drank with Jesus. They thus knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that, having died a real, physical death on the cross, Jesus' real, physical body had been raised from the dead.

Now we're getting close to the heart of the matter, for if there's any fact about Jesus that continues to be controversial, it is the fact of His resurrection. Atheists, Deists, even Muslims

are often willing to admit that Jesus was a real man, a real teacher, who really did die on a cross. But where they, and even where some who would call themselves Christians would draw the line is at the fact of His bodily resurrection. In spite of credible eyewitness testimony like Peter's, testimony which is clearly recorded here, unbelievers simply will not accept that Jesus rose from the dead.

But why not? Well, think about it. If Jesus really did rise from the dead, it not only proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that all of Jesus' enemies were wrong – He wasn't just a liar or a loser or a lunatic. Instead, the resurrection proves that Jesus is in fact Who He claimed to be – the Messiah, the anointed ruler whom Peter says in verse 42 that God has sent to be the judge over the whole world. That's the thing about Jesus that we have to know and believe in order to be in a right relationship with God. That's what Cornelius had to understand before the fire of the Holy Spirit could fall on him – that Jesus is the resurrected, living Lord of all.

Okay, so what does all this mean for us today? Simply this: if we would have a right relationship with God, we must first recognize His authority to rule over us. We must not just know about Him – we must bow the knee to Him, admitting His right to rule over every area of our lives.

But because Jesus is our living Lord and Judge, this also means that there is in fact an objective measure, an absolute standard that lies outside of us – a standard to which we are accountable. It means we have to live according to God's Will, not just according to our own desires. And of course, we find God's Will, God's absolute, objective standard, recorded in His Word. Thus, just as Cornelius accepted the teaching of Peter, all true Christians continue to live under the authority of the apostles, acknowledging that the words they either wrote themselves or approved to be written in the New Testament are the touchstone of truth for us, the sufficient rule of our faith and practice.

But that's not all. For as Peter points out in verse 43, the Old Testament prophets also pointed to the coming of Jesus. They predicted His suffering and death, and His atoning sacrifice on our behalf. They predicted His ascension into Heaven and His eternal glorious reign. They even predicted that Gentiles like Cornelius would embrace Christ and submit themselves to His rule.

So, what does all this mean for us? Simply this: if we would be in a right relationship with God, we must not just know about His Word – we must seek to live our lives according to His Word, embracing and following the teachings of the apostles and the prophets, even as we submit ourselves to the ultimate authority of our Lord Jesus. If we would have the fire of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, if we would be in a right relationship with God, it is critical that we take seriously and obey the words of the messengers God has sent to speak to us.

But here's the problem with that. According to both the prophets and the apostles, none of us have in fact lived the way that God wants us to live. Simply put, accepting the reality of Jesus' resurrection and thus submitting to the authority He deserves and thus embracing the reliability of His prophets and His apostles means confessing that we have sin in our lives.

Now, such a confession couldn't have been easy for a man like Cornelius – a powerful man, a prominent man, a man others looked up to, a man who could be proud of his good works. But if Jesus is Who He says He is – the divine Son of God Who nevertheless died on the cross to satisfy God's justice – that means that there isn't anyone who is good. The undeniable historical fact of the cross shows us in no uncertain terms what all human beings deserve – the death penalty.

But at the same time, the cross also shows us that Jesus was willing to die in our place. And the empty tomb shows us that this sacrifice was in fact acceptable to God. The good news is that if the resurrection of Christ means that Jesus is our living Lord and Judge, it also means that Jesus is the Redeemer and Savior, even of sinners like us. And as verse 43 says, this salvation, this forgiveness of sins is available to all who believe in Him, to all who trust in His name.

And so it wasn't while Cornelius was doing his good works that the Holy Spirit came upon him. It wasn't while he was sitting in the synagogue learning about the Law of Moses. It wasn't as he heard about all the things that Jesus did. It wasn't even when Peter told him that Jesus had risen from the dead, or that Jesus was coming again to judge the world. No, it wasn't until Peter was preaching about faith in Christ that the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and all those with him.

And the same thing is true for us today. It's not what we do that matters to God. It's not even the knowledge that we have about Jesus that saves us. It is only when we turn away from our pride and confess our sin, it is only when we rely on Jesus to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves – that's when we know we are in a right relationship with God. It is only on those who are trusting in Christ to save them that the fire of the Holy Spirit falls.

So, do you want to see a revival break out in this country? Do you want to see lots of people come to faith in Christ, as they did on that first Pentecost? Do you want the Holy Spirit to be poured out in abundance, to shake up this dying world, to bring new life to the dead? Maybe we need to start with our own hearts first. Maybe we need to confess our own sins, and turn away from them, trusting Jesus to cleanse us and make us new. Maybe we need to embrace the authority of Christ, and seek to live more consistently according to His Word. Maybe we need to trust Christ to be both our Lord and our Savior, living more of our lives in the light of both the cross and the empty tomb. And as we draw near to Christ with this sort of faith, with this sort of trust, can we doubt that He will give us more of His Spirit?