

XXVII.

The Signs of Pentecost.

“Signs in the earth beneath.” — *Acts ii. 19.*



Let us now consider the signs that accompanied the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—the sound of a rushing, mighty wind; tongues of fire; and the speaking with other tongues—which constitute the *fourth difficulty* that meets us in the investigation of the events of Pentecost (see p. 113). The first and second precede, the third follows the outpouring.

These signs are not merely symbolic. The speaking with other tongues, at least, appears as part of the narrative. Symbols are intended to represent or indicate something or to call the attention to it; hence it may be omitted without affecting the matter itself. A symbol is like a finger-post on the road: it may be removed without affecting the road. If the Pentecost signs were purely symbolic, the event would have been the same without them; but the absence of the sign of other tongues would have modified the character of the subsequent history completely.

This justifies the supposition that the two preceding signs were also *constituent* parts of the miracle. The fact that neither of them is an apt symbol strengthens the supposition; for a symbol must speak. The finger-post that leaves the traveler in doubt concerning the direction he is to take is no finger-post. Considering the fact that for eighteen centuries theologians have been unable to ascertain the significance of the so-called symbols with any degree of certainty, it must be acknowledged that it is difficult to believe that the apostles or the multitude understood their significance at once and in the same way. The issue proves the contrary. They did not understand the signs. The multitude, confounded and perplexed, said one to another: “What meaneth this?” And when Peter arose as an apostle, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, to interpret the miracle, he made no effort to attach any symbolic significance to the signs, but simply declared that an event had taken place by which the prophecy of Joel was fulfilled.

Did the event of Pentecost then exhaust the prophecy of Joel? By no means; for the sun was not turned into darkness, nor the moon into blood; and we hear nothing of the dreams of old men. Nor could it; the notable day that will exhaust this and so many other prophecies can not come until the return of the Lord. But the holy apostle meant to say, that the day of the Lord’s return was brought so much nearer by this event. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is one of the great events which pledge the coming of that great and notable day. Without it that day can not come. Looking back from heaven, the day of Pentecost will appear to us as the last great miracle immediately preceding the day of the Lord. And since that day shall be attended by awful signs, as was the preparatory day of Pentecost, the apostle puts them together and makes them appear as one, showing that in Joel’s prophecy God points to both events.



If it be certain that the signs attending the Lord's return—blood, fire, and vapor of smoke—shall not be *symbolic*, but *constituent* elements of that last part of the world's history, viz., its last conflagration, then it is certain that Peter did not understand the signs of Pentecost to be symbolic.

Neither can the still more unsatisfactory explanation be entertained that these signs were intended to draw and fix the attention of the multitude.

The senses of sight and hearing are the most effectual means by which the outside world can act upon our consciousness. In order suddenly to arouse and excite a person, one need only startle him by an explosion or by the flash of a dazzling light. Acting upon this, some of the earlier Methodists used to fire pistols at their revival meetings, hoping that the report and flash would create the desired state of mind. The subsequent excitement of the people would tend to make them more susceptible to the operation of the Holy Spirit. Similar experiments are those of the Salvation Army. According to this notion, the signs of Pentecost bore a similar character. It is supposed by some that the disciples, still unconverted men, were sitting together in the upper chamber on the day of Pentecost. To render them susceptible to the inflowing of the Holy Spirit they must be aroused by a noise and fire. It must seem as tho a violent thunder-storm had burst upon the city; flashes of lightning and peals of thunder were seen and heard. And when the multitude were startled and terrified, then the desired condition for receiving the Holy Spirit prevailed and the outpouring took place. Such extravagances only hurt the tender sense of the children of God; while it is almost sacrilege to compare the signs of Pentecost to the report of a pistol.

Hence there remains only one other explanation, *i.e.*, to consider the Pentecost signs as actual and real *constituents* of the event; indispensable links in the chain of occurrences.

When a ship enters the harbor we see the foaming spray under the bow and hear the waters dashing against the sides. When, a horse runs through the street we hear the noise of his hoofs against the pavement and see the clouds of dust. But who will say that these things seen and heard are symbolic? They necessarily belong to those actions and are parts of them, impossible without them. Therefore we do not believe that the Pentecost signs were symbolic, or intended to create a sensation, but that they belonged inseparably to the outpouring of the Holy Ghost, and were caused by it. The outpouring could not take place without creating these signs. When the mountain-stream dashes down the steep sides of the rocks we must hear the sound of rushing waters, we must see the flying spray; so when the Holy Spirit flows down from the mountains of God's holiness, the sound of a rushing, mighty wind must be heard, and glorious brightness must be seen, and a speaking with foreign tongues must follow.

This will sufficiently explain our meaning. Not that we deny that these signs had also a significance for the multitude. The noise of the horse's hoofs warns travelers on the road. And we concede that the purpose of the signs was realized in the perplexity and consternation

which they caused in the hearts of those present. But this we maintain, that even in the absence of the multitude and their consternation the sound of a rushing, mighty wind would have been heard and the fiery tongues would have been seen. As the horse's hoofs cause the ground to vibrate tho there be no traveler in sight, so the Holy Spirit could not come down without that sound and that brightness, even tho not a single Jew were to be found in all Jerusalem.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was real, not apparent. Having found His temple in the glorified Head, He must necessarily flow down into the body and descend from heaven. And this descent from heaven and this sowing into the body could not take place without causing these signs.

To penetrate more deeply into this matter is not lawful. On Horeb Elijah *heard* the Lord pass by in a gentle breeze, Isaiah *heard* the moving of the door-posts in the Temple. This seems to indicate that the approach of the divine majesty causes a commotion in the elements perceptible to the auditory nerve. But how, we can not tell. We observe, however:

First, that spirit can act upon matter is evident, for our spirits act upon the body every moment, and by that action are able to produce sounds. Speaking, crying, singing are nothing but our spirit acting upon the currents of air. And if our spirit is capable of such action, why not the Spirit of the Lord? Why, then, call it mysterious when the Holy Spirit in His descent so wrought upon the elements that the effects vibrated in the ears of those present?

Secondly, in making the covenant with Israel upon Sinai, the Lord God spoke in peals of thunder so terrible that even Moses said, "I am exceedingly fearful and quaking"; yet not with the intention of terrifying the people, but because a holy and angry God can not speak otherwise to a sinful generation. It is not therefore surprising that the coming of God to His New Covenant people is attended by similar signs, not in order to draw men's attention, but because it could not be otherwise.

The same applies to the tongues of fire. Supernatural manifestations are always attended by light and brightness, especially when the Lord Jehovah or His angel appears. Recall, *e.g.*, God's covenant-making with Abraham, or the occurrences at the burning bush. Why, then, should it surprise us that the descent of the Holy Spirit was attended by phenomena such as those seen by Elijah on Horeb, Moses in the bush, St. Paul on the way to Damascus, and St. John on Patmos? That the cloven tongues sat upon each of them proves nothing to the contrary; for He proceeded to each of them and entered their hearts, and in each going He left a trace of light behind.

The question, whether the fire seen by these men on those occasions belonged to a higher sphere, or was the effect of God's action upon the elements of the earth, can not be answered.



Both views have much in their favor. There is no darkness in heaven; and the heavenly light must be of a higher nature than ours, even above the brightness of the sun, according to St. Paul's description of the light on the way to Damascus. It is very probable, therefore, that in these great events the boundary of heaven overlapped the earth, and a higher glory shone in upon our atmosphere.

But, on the other hand, it is possible that the Holy Spirit wrought this mysterious brightness directly by a miracle. And this seems to be confirmed by the fact that the signs attending the law-giving on Sinai, which event was parallel to this, were not from higher spheres, but wrought from earthly elements.

Finally, let it be noticed, that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the house of Cornelius and on the disciples of Apollos was attended by a speaking with other tongues, but not by the other signs. This confirms our theory; for it was not a *coming* to the house of Cornelius, but a conducting of the Holy Spirit into another part of the body of Christ. If symbolism had been intended, the signs would have been repeated; not being symbols, they did not appear.



XXVIII.

The Miracle of Tongues.

“If any man speak in an (*unknown*) tongue, . . . let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him speak to himself, and to God.” — *1 Cor. xiv. 27, 28.*

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The third sign following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit consisted in extraordinary sounds that proceeded from the lips of the apostles—sounds foreign to the Aramaic tongue, never before heard from their lips.

These sounds affected the multitude in different ways: some called them babblings of inebriated men; others heard in them the great works of God proclaimed. To the latter, it seemed as tho they heard them speaking in their own tongues. To the Parthian it sounded like the Parthian, to the Arabian like the Arabic, etc.; while St. Peter declared that this sign belonged to the realm of revelation, for it was the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel that all the people should become partakers of the operation of the Holy Spirit.

The question how to interpret this wonderful sign has occupied the thinking minds of all times. Allow us to offer a solution, which we present in the following observations:

In the first place—This phenomenon of spiritual speaking in extraordinary sounds is not confined to Pentecost nor to the second chapter of the Acts.

On the contrary, the Lord told His disciples, even before the ascension, that they should speak with new tongues—*Mark xvi. 8.* And from the epistles of St. Paul it is evident that this prophecy did not refer to Pentecost alone; for we read in *1 Cor. xii. 10* that in the apostolic Church, spiritual gifts included that of tongues; that some spoke in *γενη γλωττώυ, i.e.,* in kinds of tongues or sounds. In *ver. 28* the apostle declares that God has set this spiritual phenomenon in the Church. It is noteworthy that in *1 Cor. xiv. 1-33* the apostle gives special attention to this extraordinary sign, showing that then it was quite ordinary. That the gift of tongues mentioned by St. Paul and the sign of which St. Luke speaks in *Acts ii.,* are substantially one and the same can not be doubted. In the first place; Christ’s prophecy is general: “They shall speak with new tongues.” Secondly, both phenomena are said to have made irresistible impressions upon unbelievers. Thirdly, both are treated as spiritual gifts. And lastly, to both is applied the same name.

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Yet there was a very *perceptible difference* between the two: the miracle of tongues on the day of Pentecost was intelligible to a large number of hearers of different nationalities; while in the apostolic churches it was understood only by a few who were called interpreters. Connected with this is the fact that the miracle on Pentecost made the impression of speaking at once to different hearers in different tongues so that they were edified. However, this is no fundamental difference. Altho in the apostolic churches there were but few interpreters, yet there were some who understood the wonderful speech.