

Acts 2: Entering the End Times

1. As Ben Foust points out¹, God has many miracles in his repertoire. To gather the attention of the festival pilgrims he could have used a voice from the heavens, an earthquake, a speaking animal, a celestial sign, angelic visitors, a rainbow, even healings. Instead, he chooses something completely new: tongues, as of fire, and speaking in unknown tongues. *Why?* What metadata is God delivering along with the gospel?
2. There are at least two symbolically significant aspects to this passage².
 - a) **Timing:** Jesus' blood was spilled on *Passover*, paralleling that of the Passover lamb. Jesus was raised on the *festival of first fruits*, which occurs during the week-long Passover celebration. Acts 2 brings us to *Pentecost*, fifty days after the first Passover Sabbath, a harvest festival also traditionally associated with Moses giving the Torah.
 - b) **Fire:** In the OT, God often manifested using fire: Abraham's torch, Moses' burning bush, the fire and smoke at Mount Sinai, the pillar of fire in the wilderness, the fire in Ezekiel 1—and now the “tongues as of fire” over all the believers.

What is God telling us through each of these?

3. The symptoms of **drunkenness**—courage, foolish talk, giddiness, reduced coordination, sleepiness, etc.—do not include speaking in previously unknown languages. Why, then, do some onlookers take the tongues-speaking³ disciples to be drunk (13)?

A look at Eph 5:18-19 sheds some light; it contrasts drunkenness with being filled with the Spirit.⁴ This has led commentators to suggest that the believers were acting giddy and uncharacteristically bold, mistakenly sneered at as drunkenness.

If so, what they were giddy about? This passage parallels the descent of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism, at which the Father affirmed Jesus as his beloved Son—something God does post-Pentecost for all believers *through the Holy Spirit* (Rom 8:16, Gal 4:6—note the use of the familiar “abba”). The Spirit tells you that God is your Father and he loves and delights in you (cf. also John 14:15-16:15). By way of illustration, one commentator shares this story from 17th-century Puritan Thomas Goodwin:

[Goodwin] says he was watching a father and a little son walking along the street and they were talking but at one point the father swept the son up in his arms and they hugged and kissed one another and said they loved each other. After

¹ <https://teachings.dwellcc.org/teaching/4061>.

² In addition to the well-known reference to the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11).

³ Interesting note: “as the Spirit enabled them” at the end of v. 4 [NRSV] is more literally rendered “as the Spirit gave them utterance,” where “utterance” is *apophthengomai*, a Greek term also used in the LXX for prophetic speech.

⁴ Related is 1 Cor 14:23, connects tongues with an exuberance which might be mistaken for madness.

that he put the boy down and they kept walking. And Thomas Goodwin says: Was the little boy more a son in his father's arms than he was down on the street? Legally, no. Objectively, no. Subjectively, experientially, all the difference. In his father's arms, he was experiencing his father's love, his sonship. And what that means is, when the Holy Spirit comes down on you in the fullness, you sense your Father's arms. It is an assurance of who you are, it's taking the things you might know with your head and making them real.

Has the Spirit ever made God's love feel real to you? On a scale of 1 (remote/head knowledge) to 10 (immediate/heart knowledge), how would you describe your experience of God's love on a typical day and at exceptional "mountain-top" experiences?



Fun fact: The Parthians (2:9) "were... among Rome's most feared enemies, including often in the first century, so Judeans' ethnic ties with many Jews in Parthia made Rome uncomfortable" (Keener's smaller Acts, 132).

Further fun fact: The festival of Pentecost (also called Weeks, Heb. *Shavuot*) traditionally commemorates the giving by Moses of the Torah. Since in rabbinic tradition the Torah is likened to milk and honey, this is a dairy-focused festival: "Everyone eats mainly dairy products and the highlight of the day is cheesecake" (*A Handbook on the Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*, 81).

Background and Leader's Notes:

This is an incredibly important chapter, for all the reasons unpacked in the questions. One preliminary regards tongues, which in this chapter is obviously not quite the same as tongues in Paul's letters. On this topic, Keener's Oxford Acts commentary is very useful. In the following table Keener lists the similarities between the two "tongues":

Lukan "tongues" (especially Acts 2:4)	Pauline "tongues" (1 Cor 12-14)
"Tongues" (<i>glóssai</i>), i.e., "languages" (Acts 2:4)	"Tongues" (<i>glóssai</i>), i.e., "languages" ¹⁸⁰ (1 Cor 13:1; 14:10-11)
Tongues are inspired by the Spirit (Acts 2:4, 17-18)	Tongues are a gift from the Spirit (1 Cor 12:7-11)
The speakers apparently do not know the languages (Acts 2:4) ¹⁸¹	The speakers do not know the languages (1 Cor 14:13-15)
They were understandable (when some who recognized the languages were present [Acts 2:8-11], but apparently not in other cases [10:46; 19:6])	They were understandable (to those with supernatural interpretation [1 Cor 12:10, 30; 14:13])
They were not intelligible to those who did not recognize the languages (Acts 2:13; cf. 10:46; 19:6)	They are not normally intelligible (without a supernatural interpretation [1 Cor 14:2, 9-11, 19, 23])
They apparently function especially as inspired praise (Acts 2:11; cf. 10:46) ¹⁸²	They function especially as praise (1 Cor 14:15-17) and prayer (14:2, 14-15)
They could be associated with (though distinguishable from) other speech-gifts like prophecy (Acts 19:6), and are related to prophetic speech (2:17-18)	They could be associated with (though distinguishable from) other speech-gifts like prophecy (1 Cor 12:10; 14:2-6, 22-33, 39-40) ¹⁸³
Tongues-speech belongs to a larger sphere of the Spirit's activity (e.g., visions and dreams, 2:17-18; cf. 2:43)	Tongues-speech belongs to a larger sphere of the Spirit's activity (e.g., healings and miracles, 12:8-10, 28-30)
Tongues at least on this occasion functions as a sign to unbelievers (Acts 2:11-13)	Tongues can function as a sign to unbelievers (1 Cor 14:22)
The affective dimension of tongues-speech leads to some outsiders assuming the speakers' drunkenness (Acts 2:13) ¹⁸⁴	The emotion of tongues-speech leads to outsiders assuming madness (1 Cor 14:23; cf. 14:11)
The gift of tongues-speech was God's choice, not always mediated through human agency (Acts 2:4; 10:44-46), though such agency was possible (cf. 19:6)	Tongues-speech, like other gifts, was God's sovereign choice (1 Cor 12:10-11), though individuals could apparently seek for gifts (12:31; 14:1, 39)

He further points out the differences in the way Luke and Paul address tongues in their contexts:

Lukan “tongues” (especially Acts 2:4)	Pauline “tongues” (1 Cor 12–14)
Tongues begin in (Acts 2:5–11) and attest (10:45–46) the Spirit’s multicultural work	Paul addresses the use of tongues in a more homogeneous setting of Corinthian house churches (cf. 1 Cor 14:23) ¹⁸⁵
Hearers understood tongues (though only at Pentecost, with a linguistically diverse audience, not in other settings (10:46; 19:6)	Hearers would not (normally) understand the tongues (1 Cor 14:2, 16–19, 23)
Tongues are not abused in the instances described in Acts, which are positive	Tongues are abused in the instances presupposed in 1 Corinthians, although Paul affirms this experience as a divine gift (1 Cor 12:10; 14:26), especially valuable for private use (14:2, 4); he practices it privately (14:18); and he warns against forbidding its public use if accompanied by interpretation (14:39)
Multiple speakers apparently speak in tongues simultaneously, in group worship (Acts 2:4; 10:46; 19:6) ¹⁸⁶	Those who speak in tongues should do so one at a time, allowing for interpretation of each (1 Cor 14:27–28)
Tongues are a sign of power to witness to the nations (Acts 1:8)	Tongues are one among many gifts (among the less useful in public), useful especially for private prayer
Tongues begin early in some believers’ experience with the Spirit (Acts 2:4; 10:44–46; 19:6)	Tongues are one among many gifts (among the less useful in public), useful especially for private prayer
Luke does not use the analogy of the body and its members or speak of spiritual “gifts” (focusing instead on the “gift” of the Spirit)	Paul speaks of diverse gifts of grace (ideally especially as enablements for service to others) or of the Spirit in the context of a body with many members (Rom 12:4–8; 1 Cor 12:4–30)

To quote Keener, “against many, it is virtually inconceivable that the two writers would independently coin the same obscure phrase for two entirely different Spirit-given phenomena. So while the gifts are clearly different actions of the Spirit, they are at the very least cousins. (Note also that when tongues arises again in Acts, despite not entailing unknown foreign languages, it serves a similar function, validating and often signaling by the Spirit the crossing of barriers by the gospel.

Depending on the group discussing the passage, of course, it may be important to ensure that tongues is not misunderstood as *the* mark of the Spirit or necessary sign of salvation.

Where is God’s heart in this passage, and what does Luke want us to see? This passage presents a paradigm for a new era, the final chapter, the end times. The contrasts with pre- and post-Pentecost are telling and valuable. The focus of the chapter is essentially “verbal”, about the spread of God’s message.