I Will Pour Out My Spirit

(Joel 2:28-32)

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The Day of Pentecost had come. A sound came from heaven and the disciples of Christ were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:2-3). As the Spirit gave utterance, the disciples began to speak to the Jews gathered in Jerusalem in their own languages and confusion ensued (vv. 4-12). The Jewish crowd couldn’t understand how the Galilean disciples of Christ could speak in the native languages of the people (vv. 7-8). Peter addressed the crowd to explain this work of God. In so doing, he quoted a prophecy from Joel 2:28-32 that ignited a theological discussion about the exact relationship of Pentecost and the outpouring of the Spirit of God in regard to the prophecy of Joel. Peter testified, “This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16).1 Did this event in Acts fulfill Joel’s prophecy? Through a careful examination of Scripture this question will be answered and the predominant views will be presented.

**Last Days Partial Fulfillment**

A common understanding is to focus on the opening words quoted in Acts 2:17-18 from Joel, “And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; And they shall prophesy.” The key to this interpretation is seen in the definition of the last days, “Joel’s prophecy would see its realization “ _in the last days_ ”—the period initiated by the arrival of John the Baptist and visitation of Jesus the Messiah (Matt 3; 17:10–13; Mark 1:1–15; 1 Cor 10:11; 1 Tim 4:1–5; 2 Tim 3:1–9; Heb 1:1–4; 9:26; Jas 4:8; 1 Pet 1:20; 1 John 4:1–4).”2 In the Old Testament the Spirit of God came upon a relatively few number

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of people for a specific ministry or purpose. Now the Spirit of God would indwell all who believe in Christ.

The remaining part of Peter’s quote from Joel refers to significant cosmic events. It is worth noting that these events will not be natural. God declares, “I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: Blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord” (Acts 2:19-20). Surely this part of the prophecy has not been fulfilled. Rather, it looks forward, “The celestial signs described here fit well the picture of the last times in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 24:29; Mark 13:24–27; Luke 21:25–28). Nothing recorded about the first century corresponds to this. Furthermore the “great and awesome day of the LORD” has not yet transpired.” Therefore, this particular view sees the outpouring of the Spirit of God in verses 17-18 as partially fulfilling the prophecy of Joel as the beginning of the Messianic age. However, the cosmic events in the rest of the prophecy remain to be fulfilled in the future.

**Complete Fulfillment**

Another interpretation is to see the complete fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel in the first century. Again, the last days play a significant role in interpretation. Accordingly, under this point of view, they are defined as, “the days of the Messiah (Is 2:2).” However, the difference between this assessment from the Partial Fulfillment view is that even the prophecy from Joel contained in Acts 2:19-21 is said to have already been fulfilled. The powerful signs, smoke, and darkness are said to refer to, “the signs which were to precede the destruction of Jerusalem.”

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Other similar viewpoints look for spiritual fulfillments on the day of Pentecost (or other key events in the first century) of the cosmic signs spoken of in Joel.

**Already Not Yet**

Progressive Dispensationalists believe that the Kingdom of Christ has begun. Specifically, they believe, “Christ has *already* inaugurated the Davidic reign in heaven at the right hand of the Father, which equals the throne of David, though He does not yet reign as Davidic king on earth during the Millennium. Likewise, the new covenant has already been inaugurated, though its blessings are not yet fully realized until the Millennium.”

It is only natural, therefore, that they believe the prophecy quoted by Peter was initially fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. Yet, some aspects of Joel’s prophecy await the future rule of Christ.

**No Fulfillment**

Was Joel 2 fulfilled at all? This is the question some ask when looking at the words of Peter recorded in Acts. Their argument would be that the prophecy of Joel awaits a complete future fulfillment. The late Dr. Ryrie summarized and adhered to this point of view:

> To prove that the Spirit can produce such things, Peter quoted from Joel 2:28–32. This is a prophecy which will be fulfilled during the millennium when Israel is reestablished in her own land. Peter was not saying that the prophecy was fulfilled at Pentecost or even that it was partially fulfilled; knowing from Joel what the Spirit could do, he was simply reminding the Jews that they should have recognized what they were then seeing as a work of the Spirit also. He continued to quote from Joel at length only in order to be able to include the salvation invitation recorded in verse 21.

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With this understanding, the entire prophecy of Joel awaits its fulfillment in the Millennium. Therefore, Peter was just attributing the outpouring of the Spirit to the work of God. The Spirit of God will be poured out on the nation of Israel perfectly fulfilling the prophecy of Joel during the Millennium. The events of Acts 2 are said to be similar to but not identical to this coming future fulfillment.

**A Preferred Interpretation**

There are a number of reasons to believe that this last interpretation is correct, that Joel 2 was not fulfilled at all on the day of Pentecost. It can be rightly noted that Peter did not specifically state that Joel had been *fulfilled*. Instead, he stated, “But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16). It appears that Peter was claiming the outpouring of the Spirit of God on Pentecost was something similar to what would happen when the prophecy of Joel 2 is fulfilled.

There are some exegetical clues that help us to recognize that this should be the preferred interpretation.

Peter made a significant change in Joel’s prophecy as he quoted it from the Septuagint, and this change supports the view that he was not claiming fulfillment. First, he changed “after this” (Joel 2:28) to “in the last days” (Acts 2:17). In the context of Joel’s prophecy the time in view is the day of the Lord: the Tribulation (Joel 2:30–31) and the Millennium (Joel 2:28–29).⁸

Joel’s prophecy looks forward to the time of Tribulation and the Millennium. Therefore, it corresponds that this meaning (even though it was quoted by Peter in Acts) cannot change. Peter was justified in quoting Joel to refer to the similar work of the Spirit of God. However, similarity does not equate with identity.

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In the future, only believers will enter into the Kingdom of God after the Tribulation. Thus, it corresponds that at that time God will pour out His Spirit, “on all flesh” (Acts 2:17). That can hardly be said about the day of Pentecost. The Spirit of God was poured out to the disciples, but that is a far cry from being poured out on all flesh (Joel 2:28).

It is interesting to note that in the broader context of the New Testament we see a similar quote from Paul. In Romans 10:13 Paul quoted Joel 2:32 when he said, “For ‘whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’” Paul’s application was that salvation is available to both Jew and Gentile. This is a point similar to Peter’s application in verse 21 that salvation is available to all. Yet, Paul did not claim the fulfillment of Joel 2:32. Rather, he used it to make a larger point about the Gospel. This consistent usage demonstrates that a future fulfillment of Joel is in agreement with the broader context of Scripture.

**Conclusion**

It is doubtful that Peter could have ever imagined that quoting the prophecy of Joel could have led to such a variety of interpretations: partial fulfillment, complete fulfillment, already not yet, and no fulfillment. During the time of the fulfillment of Joel, “This pouring out of the Spirit is connected to the day of Yahweh (2:31), a time when Yahweh will roar in judgment. Astronomical signs will occur. The sun will grow dark (as in the plague of Exodus 10:21–29) and the moon will turn blood red. “Everyone who calls on the name of Yahweh,” however, “will be saved” from this judgment (Joel 2:32), a text quoted by Paul in Romans 10:13.”

Pentecost did not fulfill Joel 2:28-32. Even though the prophecy of Joel 2 awaits a future fulfillment, we can be thankful that the Church has received a similar outpouring of the Spirit of God in this present age of grace.