

## The Promised Holy Spirit

*“And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”*

*Joel 2:28a*

Our text is probably the most well-known word of Joel’s prophecy. Every time Acts 2 is read at Pentecost, we hear the apostle Peter quote this text to explain what is happening to the disciples in Jerusalem. Peter expressly denies that they are drunk. What is happening to the disciples is what the prophet Joel spoke of in our text.

However, if we want to understand correctly the word of Joel about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, we should keep in mind that he spoke of this pouring out of the Spirit in a broad framework. We can characterize the prophecy of Joel as an impressive announcement of *the day of the LORD*. This day is central in everything he proclaims. His prophecy is about this great and dreadful day.

Israel’s prophets speak repeatedly about the day of the LORD. We could say that the expression “the day of the LORD” is a peculiar intimation in Old Testament prophecy. We should not think here of a specific date or time period but of a certain *event*. When Israel’s prophets speak of the day of the LORD, they mean that something decisive will take place and that it is the LORD who brings it about. The LORD comes to confront Israel in this decisive event. He will control it completely and fill it with his majesty.

In the proclamation of the great and dreadful day of the LORD we come face to face with what has been called the prophetic perspective. When Israel’s prophets speak of this day, they often announce things that will happen centuries later. They open the window not just to the near future but also to the fullness of time, even to the day of Christ’s return.

All this we should keep in mind when we read Joel’s prophecy. Joel has impressively proclaimed the coming of the day of the LORD. But his prophecy brings out things that only centuries later will be fulfilled.

We do not know in what time period Joel prophesied. Certain information makes it probable that he was active in Judah. The reason for his appearance as prophet was the coming of a terrible plague of locusts. The locusts have already raised havoc in the country (cf. Joel 1:11, 12). Now the army of locusts is on its way to Jerusalem (cf. Joel 2:1). The prophet Joel tells the people that in this plague of locusts they are facing the *LORD*. He threatens Jerusalem because of her sins. This plague is a manifestation of his day (cf. Joel 2:11).

Joel prophesies not only to announce this dreadful day of the LORD but also to call to repentance. The people have to humble themselves under the punishing hand of the LORD (cf. Joel 2:12, 13). When they turn away from their sins they will again have life and a future, then the LORD will again give prosperity. Then for his children, the day of the LORD will not be a dreadful execution of judgment but a manifestation of his grace that renews and gives restoration.

It is in this context that the prophet speaks of the *outpouring* of the Holy Spirit. The people will never again be ashamed (cf. Joel 2:27). For the LORD will pour out his Spirit on all his people and they will all be prophets. The Word of the LORD will govern them and make them speak of the mighty deeds of God (cf. Joel 2:28, 29).

From Peter’s sermon on Pentecost we know that, with regard to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Joel spoke of a distant future. He was allowed to encourage the people of his day with a promise that only at a later date would be fulfilled.

This prophecy has always raised many questions. Does this promise mean that the Holy Spirit did not work renewal and sanctification in the old covenant yet? Do we have to conclude that the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit did not start until Pentecost?

When we read the Old Testament carefully, this conclusion cannot be correct. Different texts speak clearly of the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of God's children also in the time before Pentecost. David prays in Psalm 143, "Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground." (Ps 143:10.) Nehemiah 9:20 tells us that the LORD gave Israel in the desert his good Spirit to instruct them. When the prophet Isaiah looks back at Israel's sins and disobedience, he calls out, "Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy...." (Isa 63:10)

To encourage Zerubbabel and Joshua, Haggai points out that the Spirit of the LORD remained among Israel when they came out of Egypt (cf. Hag 2:5).

All these texts make clear that also *before* Pentecost the Holy Spirit performed his redemptive work among Israel. Also before Pentecost no one was able to believe and fear the LORD except by the Holy Spirit.

In spite of that, the Old Testament prophecies speak repeatedly about the coming of the Spirit as a gift of God *in the future*. That is the case in our text but also in Isaiah 44:3; Ezekiel 36:27; and Zechariah 12:10. In prophecy this outpouring of the Spirit is undeniably connected with the day of salvation that will dawn when the *Messiah* will appear (compare Isaiah 44:3 with 61:1, 2, and Ezekiel 36:27 with 34:23, 24). The Messiah, upon whom the Spirit descended and remained, will also be the Giver of the Spirit (cf. Jn 1:33).

The word of our text becomes a reality on the day of Pentecost. That is when Christ pours out the Spirit as the gift he has obtained for his people. The coming of the Spirit implies that the work that the Father had commissioned the Messiah to do has been accomplished obediently (cf. Jn 7:39b). Only after the Messiah has been glorified can the Spirit be poured out. The point of this pouring out is, that the work of the Spirit is much *richer* and *broader* than in the old covenant. Joel's prophecy speaks of "pouring out," even on "all people." This means that the Spirit comes in an overflowing abundance on all who believe, even on male and female servants.

Through this richer, all-encompassing gift of the Spirit, God's people will never again be ashamed (cf. Joel 2:27b). Unfaithfulness and apostasy will come to an end. The people of the future will indeed live in accordance with the covenant (cf. Jer 31:33, 34; Ezek 36:27).

In the old covenant sometimes office-bearers were filled with the Holy Spirit. But presently *all* will be filled with the Spirit (cf. Acts 2:4), and walk by the Spirit (cf. Rom 8:4). And so all will have the Spirit.

In Israel too, the Holy Spirit has done his renewing and sanctifying work. Abraham's faith, and David's theocratic kingship were gifts of the Holy Spirit. Israel's continual unfaithfulness called out for a richer and broader working of the Spirit. It called out for the Spirit such as the Messiah would obtain for his people.

The history of Israel is actually one great cry for the coming of the Messiah and the new covenant in his blood, and for the outpouring of the Spirit as *the* great gift of that new covenant!