

Joel's Prophecy & Acts 2: A Brief Commentary

In Acts 2, Jews had come from all over the world to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. This was about ten days after Jesus' ascension, c. 30 AD. The Holy Spirit filled the apostles, as Jesus had promised, and they spoke in tongues— the many languages of the lands from which the visiting Jews had come. Obviously, these Galilean men had not learned all these languages. As the crowd tried to determine what was happening, Peter stood up and explained that Joel's prophecy had begun to be fulfilled (Joel 2:28-32).

The "last days" refers to the final era of the world from a spiritual perspective. We often divide history into three great Biblical eras

- Patriarchal (c. 4000 BC to 1446 BC – creation to the Law of Moses)
- Mosaic (1446 BC to 30 AD – Law of Moses and "old" covenant in effect for Israel)
- Christian (30 AD to the end of time).

The "last days" describes the Christian era.

"God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." "All flesh" is used here in the sense of Jews and Gentiles (see Rom. 3:9). In Acts 2, it was poured out on the twelve apostles, all of whom were Jews. Note that they were the only people recorded doing miracles in this chapter. As we'll see later in Acts, this direct outpouring of the Spirit (called "baptism of the Holy Spirit" by Jesus, Acts 1:5) is different from the reception of miraculous gifts described in the following verses. In Acts 10:44, the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles who were listening to Peter preach. Cornelius and his company received the Holy Spirit directly and spoke in tongues, just as the apostles had in Acts 2. Such an event is only recorded in these two texts, and Peter noted its unique nature in Acts 11:15-17. Once Gentiles had also received the outpouring of the Spirit from God, the "all flesh" prophecy was completed.

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Many others would receive miraculous gifts. These recipients would not be kings or specially appointed prophets or religious leaders but ordinary people. This referred to the gifts which people received by the apostles' hands (Acts 8:18).

The wonders in the heavens (outer space and sky) and earth employed common prophetic language to describe the "day of the Lord," a day of judgment. Earthly rulers and nations were frequently represented by celestial lights— Sun, Moon, stars. The darkening of these great luminaries, along with other striking imagery, depicted their fall. These are symbolic descriptions.

The "day of the Lord" with which Joel had been primarily concerned was the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC to the Babylonian army. But he also spoke of another "day of the Lord" in the last days, namely the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 AD. Just as God had preserved a remnant of his people in the sixth century BC, so he would in the first century AD. But the latter represented a spiritual remnant. One difference between the two destructions was that the city and temple were rebuilt after the first but not after the second. After 70 AD, the Jews were scattered from Judea, and Judaism was transformed by the traditions of the Pharisees, creating a new religion which bears hardly any resemblance to the Law of Moses. God's people became the spiritual kingdom, the church of Christ. While Jesus warned his followers to flee the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:15-18)— and history suggests they did escape— this salvation was spiritual, as we see from Peter's statement in Acts 2:38. Jesus and his apostles spoke of a final day of the Lord, when Jesus will return, the dead will be raised, and everyone will be judged. Unlike the destruction of Jerusalem, which both times was preceded by signs or indications of time, the final day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. We're not told when, but we know it will come, and we've been told how to be saved in that final day of the Lord.