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THE PROMISE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

by John Gelding

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THE PROMISE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

From the dawn of history man has always made agreements, covenants, or promises. There are really two kinds of promises. There is the conditional promise where everything depends on an 'if'. 'If you are a nice boy I will buy you an ice cream'. Then there is an unconditional promise where there are no 'ifs' but a straight-out promise made by one party to another. In the Marriage Rite, for example, you take your man 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.' The man makes the same promise as the woman does, on the grounds of their love for each other.

God's promises are very much like the unconditional one. There is not one single thing we have to do for our salvation. All is of God. We only have to accept with thanksgiving. He also promises, out of His abundant riches, to give us a measure of His unlimited and unending resources. Jesus promised in John 16:7 that a new era was about to be ushered in which would be the way God would abundantly pour out His Spirit in a way unknown ever before. The Son of God promises, 'If I depart I will send Him unto you.'

In an earlier statement Jesus gave a hint of what would take place in the new dispensation. In John 7:38-39 He said He would give living water which can quench the thirst of the soul. He made this assertion during the Feast of Tabernacles which was rather significant because the Feast commemorated the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness under the leadership of Moses. You will remember how God provided water for their parched throats and lives. And now, over a thousand years later, they remembered with thanksgiving what God had done. On the last day the priest took a jug of water and poured it over the altar and offered it to God.

Jesus takes this symbolism one step further. It is true, water is necessary for life. But there was something far more important. Man's deepest needs needed to be fulfilled and satisfied. The soul of man, that part of him which distinguishes him from all of creation, is restless, empty, dissatisfied, and

frustrated until God takes up His presence within it. So it was in the midst of all present, Jesus promised to satisfy all who would come to Him and who would drink of the living water that never perishes.

Jesus said, 'If any one thirst, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'.' And John adds the comment for his readers, 'Now this He said about the Spirit, which those who believed in Him were to receive.'

Let us look at some of these promises Jesus made about the Holy Spirit.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE INITIATOR OF NEW LIFE:

Christology is the study of Christ's life and atoning death and ascension. Pneumatology is the study of the Holy Spirit and His work among men. And of His work, Christ said 'And when He comes He will prove to the people of the world that they are wrong about sin, and about what is right, and about God's judgment'. (16:8, T.E.V.)

The key word associated here with the Spirit's work is what the Authorised Version calls 'reproves'. 'He will reprove the world of sin, righteousness and judgment'. Knox translates the phrase '... it will be for Him to prove the world wrong.' The Greeks had a way of saying things which is very often difficult to express in English but the idea here is that the Spirit of God will take the things of God and apply them to the mind of man in such a way that man cannot fail to see it.

Because the Spirit is the Illuminator, He will show man his depraved condition. For many it is often a soul-shattering experience for man to know he is as filthy rags in the sight of God. Yet it is necessary if man is to enter salvation. The fact of the matter is that every man is dead before God, dead in sin and trespasses. Jesus told Nicodemus of an unavoidable occurrence which must take place if a man is going to heaven. To this learned and intelligent man He said, 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee; except a man be born of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.' (John 3:5)

Now, if you wish, you can side track the issue. You can cloud this statement with philosophical and intellectual answers.. but the truth remains: a man must be born again. He must come to the position where he is prepared to admit his sin which the Holy Spirit has been striving to show him and accept Jesus Christ into his life. This is all bound up with the work of the Spirit as He mysteriously deals with our lives.

This is nothing new. The prophets of old looked forward to the day when God would bring about the creation of the new man through the operation of the Holy Spirit.

In the 37th Chapter of Ezekiel, the prophet saw a vision of dry bones in a valley. The picture is clearly interpreted as being the spiritual state of the people of Israel. Sin and disobedience had cut them off. They were, as far as God was concerned, as good as dead. Their life in Babylon was the consequence of their sin and it was a further picture as being completely and totally outside the land of God.

But the situation was not as hopeless as we might think. Ezekiel was commanded to prophesy over these dry bones, and miraculously, before his very eyes, the bones rattled and came together. The second part of that miracle was when sinew and flesh came upon them. But the third part of the miracle was more significant, for God breathed upon them. He sent His Spirit and now there was life. The meaning was clear just as it is clear in the New Testament. Men are dead and lifeless until the Spirit of God breathes upon them. Ezekiel heard God say of the people of Israel, 'I shall put my Spirit in you and ye shall live' (37:14).

Today that happens every time a man or woman comes under the influence of the Divine Spirit of God.

Listen to what St. Paul told Titus concerning the work of the Holy Spirit as the initiator of the new life. God saved us '... not because of any good works that we ourselves have done, but because of His own mercy that He saved us through the washing by which the Holy Spirit gives us new birth and new life. For God abundantly poured out the Holy Spirit on us, through Jesus Christ our Saviour, that by His grace we might be made right with God and come into possession of the eternal life we hope for.

This is a true saying.' (3:5-8).

Jesus promises us all NEW LIFE because the Spirit of God is the initiator of the new birth.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE INITIATOR OF GUIDANCE:

In Verse 13 (John 16), Jesus promised, 'When the Spirit of truth comes He will guide you into all truth.' Somebody once wrote, 'The Holy Spirit is the never-exhausted discloser of "new truth"' (Dr. Van Dusen). It is never easy to know the will of God in any matter, and yet, throughout history, even to our own day, there have been men who have sought guidance and found it because they are filled by the Holy Spirit.

Every Christian should know something about this in their lives. Samuel Shoemaker writes: 'The difficult thing about guidance is not the receiving or recognizing it: it is the truly wanting it, so that we come to God stripped, honest, without pretence'. If you are prepared to do that, God will speak to you in a way you never dreamt of.

Jesus said, 'He will guide you into all truth.' Simply stated, it means man may find the will of God. Guidance may come in a variety of ways; through a friend, because of an event, perhaps a piece of literature. Abraham Lincoln once said, 'I am satisfied that, when the Almighty wants me to do, or not to do, a particular thing He finds a way of letting me know it.'

Very often guidance comes chiefly from Scripture. There we find the deposit of revealed truth and Jesus said that the Holy Spirit, when He comes, will take the things of Christ and bring them to our remembrance. In other words guidance comes from feeding on the Word of God and somehow it speaks to us when we are perplexed or uneasy about a certain line of action. It is a matter of being absorbed in it so God can use it.

Perhaps if there is little guidance in our lives then it is probably due to the superficial way we read the Scriptures. I heard about a first-year theological student in

America who was told by some students that the Professor of Biblical Theology only asked one question at the end of the year and it was always on the details of the Minor Prophets. In that year he knew those Minor Prophets back to front and he had an air of confidence when he walked into the examination room. However, his countenance soon changed when he read the paper for, this year, the Professor asked the students to discuss and criticize the life of Moses. After a little while he began to write the following, 'Far be it from me to criticize the acts of Moses ... BUT IF YOU WANT A LIST OF THE MINOR PROPHETS, HERE THEY ARE.'

Now many people read their Bible like that young man. We read and study something like that. We read only what interests us. We have a quiet time when we feel like it or when we are in the mood. In one of the largest theological Seminaries in America, 1900 students were asked questions about their devotional life. 92% said there was no devotional life at all. How can the Holy Spirit mould and create us like Christ if we know nothing about the mind of Christ? It is impossible for the Spirit of God to guide when we do not study the Scriptures.

Long-standing Christians may write a few lines on Moses but how many could write a detailed account of the work of the Holy Spirit as He is related to the Christian life? No wonder there is little guidance! No wonder Christians find it difficult to overcome the hurdles of life because they know little or nothing of His activity. Instead they seek guidance from a friend or a book or some person engaged in helping others. It is not that it is wrong to do this, but seldom do we search the Scriptures to find the will of God.

But please do not misunderstand me. God does guide us in most extraordinary ways. C.S. Lewis tells of a strong impulse he once had to go to a particular barber one day and he found a stranger prepared to talk about his spiritual life. This was no hunch or coincidence. Rather, the Holy Spirit is the source, the matrix, from which these things come.

Give your life completely to God Who will give you new life and, having put you on the road to eternal life, will give you the guidance you need to reach your destiny. 'If I go away I will send Him unto you', said Jesus, 'And when He comes He will

guide you into all truth.'

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE INITIATOR OF OUR SANCTIFICATION:

In one sense, a Christian can never be content with the life he lives. Before conversion a man has not the faintest idea how far short he falls of God's standards. After conversion, he sees his life in a new perspective. He sees his sins and he knows these grieve God. He is aware of his hypocrisy, his Pharisaism, his defilement of flesh and body, and his half-heartedness. Very often there is deliberate sin.

It is at this point God the Holy Spirit is active again. His work is to remove man's bias towards evil. John the Baptist said of Christ and the Holy Spirit, 'I baptize you with water for repentance... but He who is coming after me is mightier than I ... He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.' (Matthew 3:11).

What a promise! John the Baptist readily admitted his rite was a baptism of cleansing, a cleansing which symbolized the removal of sin after confession. But that is not enough. It does not deal with the sin principle embedded in our depraved natures. Therefore, John looked forward when there would be a greater baptism with the 'Holy Ghost and with fire'.

The contrast here between water, Spirit, and fire might be stated like this: 'water only touches the surface, and, though purifying, has no permanent result. In contrast to this is the Spirit which, wherever He works, reaches the heart, and there produces life; and fire, which, taking hold of its object, either melts or entirely destroys it.' (Levertoff).

Here is the thought of the Holy Spirit sanctifying and purifying the human heart. By sanctification we mean that act of the Holy Spirit which purges or purifies or makes us holy. The picture of the refining fire speaks of the dross removed from the metal, or chaff removed from wheat. I once saw a sugar-cane field deliberately set on fire and where the leaves, rubbish, plant life, and anything that may have been present, were completely destroyed, and all that stood was a beautiful field of sugar-cane. Even the snakes fled. That is what happens to our lives when the Spirit is allowed to work. He purges our lives and produces righteousness.

You might ask how is this possible? How can I know the cleansing and the purifying work of the Holy Spirit so that I might be a better and honourable vessel? Sanctification requires the daily dying to self, and that means we will need to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. This is where the Christian life is going to cost you something. Humility does not come easily. It is not something you are told to pray for in Scripture. You do it yourself in order that the Spirit might have the pre-eminence in your vessel. But so many hang on to the old way of life, the sins we love and cherish.

Did you hear about the Texan who arrived in heaven? The story goes that the angel assigned to him asked him if he had any requests. 'Yep', he replied, 'I have always liked choir music. Get me 10,000 sopranos.' 'An unusual request', commented the angel, 'but you shall certainly have them. Anything else?' 'Yep, 10,000 altos'. The angel promised them. 'And 10,000 tenors', added the Texan, 'and that'll be all.' 'Well -er - what about the basses?' 'Oh', explained the Texan, 'I'll sing bass'.

Now it may be that attitude of mind and heart is characteristic of many Christians. They want the blessings of God and the promise of the Holy Spirit, but they want to play it solo. Where the ego reigns supreme and where there is no humility there can be no effective work of the Spirit.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE INITIATOR OF EVANGELISM:

Here is another great promise associated with the Holy Spirit. Prior to Christ's great missionary commission, He said, 'And behold I send unto you the promise of My Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.' (Luke 24:49). In Acts 1:8, He stated it again in a new freshness that made those disciples eager and anxious for the promise: 'But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judaea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.'

Today there is a lot of talk about missions to a lost world, a world apart from Christ. But history bears witness that there has always been a minority within the Christian Church that

has been interested in this aspect of Christ's commission. And why? Is it not true that theologians and others have been so taken up with the historical Christ that they have missed His living power available today? Historians have reminded us we are faced today with institutionalism. Christ is a figure of the historic past, the initiator of a great religious movement, and there He remains. We could well do without Him. The Church would continue to exist!!! And, at the other end of the scale, men are caught up in individualism where what is more important is a daily experience of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Let me put it another way: in Catholic theology, the Holy Spirit is mainly the sustainer or supporter of the Church. On the other hand, Evangelicals and Protestants have stressed His work as the One who merely awakens us to the things of Christ and they have connected Him with our justification and sanctification. 'So the Spirit is either institutionalized or individualized' writes Hendrikus Berkhof.

We would also have to agree with Karl Barth, one of the world's greatest theologians who died recently, that for too long Christians have been too busy with their own eternal salvation and their private edification that they have no time left for others who have not been reached with the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said to His disciples, 'All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth, therefore go ...' (Matthew 28:18-19). And again, 'Ye shall receive power after the Holy Ghost has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses ...' St. Paul said, 'We have not received a spirit of timidity but of power' (dynamite). Do you remember what Jesus promised to His disciples and to us because He was to go to the Father? 'He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the father'. 'You shall receive power; therefore go ...'

We have seen that the promised Holy Spirit is the initiator of new life. He awakens faith in us towards Christ. This promise is being fulfilled daily where Christ is preached. He initiates guidance through reading God's Word, and guides through other people and events. He initiates our sanctification as we humbly place our lives in His hands. He is the initiator of evangelism in that He provides us with the power and equipment to literally 'go' to a lost world.

Amazing? Incredible? Mysterious? Yes, that is true. But just as those early disciples received the promise of the Holy Spirit, so we are able to go forward confidently knowing the promise is for us and our Church. 'If I depart,' said Jesus, 'I will send Him unto you.'

A PRAYER

Heavenly Father, grant to each and every one of us out of Your abundant resources the gift of Your Spirit, and grant that we being aware of His Presence and power, may be fit vessels to serve You all the days of our lives.

In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

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