

The Holy Spirit

Three Aspects of His Work in the Believer

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The Foundational Work of the Holy Spirit in the Heart of the Believer

Romans 5:1–11

I have to thank the organisers of this conference for the invitation to be with you to consider such a delightful theme as the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. Of course in itself that is a vast topic, and maybe if you had been given the task of leading the thinking and discussion you might have put the emphasis in different places from where I shall put it. So let me say now in advance briefly, the three particular topics that I shall be engaging with today.

1. The foundational work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer

The work that the Holy Spirit does, which is the foundation of all that subsequently follows, as he shares the love of God—not our love for God but God’s love for us. The delightful ministry of the Holy Spirit as he takes the love of God for us and pours it into our hearts. As someone might take a pitcher of water and turn it out, and the water goes here and there and spreads like water does, in jumps sometimes, or freely flowing, so the Holy Spirit takes God’s love for us and pours it out into our hearts. That blessed ministry forms the solid foundation of security and peace within that gives us the courage to face all the future programme that God has for us.

2. The ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts

As I suggest that topic, I am thinking of such passages as Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: those two great prayers of our brother Paul for people who, he says, have already received the Holy Spirit. They have been sealed with the Holy Spirit; they possess the earnest of the Spirit in their hearts (1:15–23; 3:14–21).

You say, ‘What more could they want than that?’

Ah, but Paul bows his knees, so he tells us, to constantly pray for an ongoing work of the Spirit in the heart of the believer.

3. The Holy Spirit’s role in our sanctification

The work of the Holy Spirit in our initial and progressive sanctification.

The Foundational Work of the Holy Spirit in the Heart of the Believer

Just let us turn to Romans 5 and read the paragraph in which we find this delightful description of his ministry.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Rom 5:1–11)

As we ponder their meaning, may that same Holy Spirit, who inspired all those words, be our teacher. We have read the delightful phrase that it is his work to *pour out God's love for us into our hearts* (v. 5), and I have suggested that this is in some sense the foundational work of the Holy Spirit for the believer. The question is, why do I say that? Why *foundation*? Perhaps I can answer that question by briefly pointing out the context of this paragraph in Paul's marvellous epistle.

The Epistle to the Romans, rightly loved by the church through all the centuries—or should have been—deals systematically with the topic of *the gospel*. No small thing, the gospel! This systematic exposition of it takes sixteen whole chapters. In chapter 5, as far as the individual believer is concerned, there is the first mention of the Holy Spirit. He is mentioned of course in the early verses of chapter 1 in connection with the resurrection of our Lord and the declaration to the world at large that he is indeed the Son of God. But concerning the individual believer, this is the first mention of him pouring out the love of God into our hearts.

We might sum it up at once with this tremendous affirmation of assurance: 'Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God' (v. 9). That is the birthright of every believer in the Lord Jesus: the utter certainty that we shall be saved from the wrath of God through him. It is absolutely foundational.

As we open the Epistle to the Romans we find Paul talking about the gospel and how he's not ashamed of it:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.' (1:16–17)

Why isn't Paul ashamed of the gospel? Because it works, that's why—'it is the power of God for salvation'. It is not just a philosophical theory; this gospel actually works, and it works because it is on the principle of faith and not on meritorious struggle. But let us ask Paul, 'You say that you're not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God to salvation, but why do we need to be saved in the first place?'

The first reason why we need to be saved

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. (1:18)

Our first need for salvation is because in and of ourselves we stand under the wrath of God. Now, I'm aware that that has become an unpopular topic in our modern day. We are a much more easy-going people, aren't we, in these modern times than our forefathers were? But the fact is, the first reason for needing to be saved is that in and of ourselves we stand under the wrath of God.

The second reason why we need to be saved

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned. (5:12)

We suffer from the wreckage produced by Adam's sin, a colossal wreckage that has spoiled every member of the human race born into this world. We need to be saved, and can be and shall be, from the wreckage induced by Adam's sin.

We need both things, and you will notice that in this epistle Paul puts first, not second, the need to be saved from the wrath of God. Now, I'm not saying that this is how we should approach our friends who are not yet saved, nor the public in general. Sometimes it is appropriate to come to people where they are, and they will come to feel the wreckage of their lives—their own disabilities, the crime and criminology around, the infirmity of the body, and death staring them in the face. We need to come alongside them with the glorious comfort of the gospel that has a programme to save them from the wreckage of their sin. But if you were going to put the gospel in its logical order, you wouldn't start there—you would start with the prior need to be saved from the wrath of God.

And this is what the Holy Spirit is desiring to assure our hearts about in this lovely passage we have read. He brings us to the point where we can be utterly sure that we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Christ.

An illustration

Let me use a homely little illustration of the point. I want you to imagine a young gentleman with more money than sense, and his father with even more money and even less sense! The young man has been given the very last word of a Jaguar for his seventeenth birthday and he prides himself at driving through Dublin's O'Connell Street at fifty miles per hour just to show what the Jaguar can do (and impress the police). But he's a bit of a stupid young man, and sometimes he drives the car when he's under the influence of alcohol. On one of those days he drives it slap bang into a concrete wall and shatters the thing. As he gets out of it, the cool night air brings him to his senses and he sees the wreck. And then it dawns on him: it wasn't

quite true to say his father *gave* it to him; he was only *lent* his father's car. What will he do now?

He says to himself, 'Dad had better not know about this. I'll keep out of his way. I'll hurry up and find an engineer who can put the thing more or less together again—well, you know, apart from one or two scratches here and there and an odd dent—then I can take it to father and say, "I'm sorry, I had a little accident, but there's just a dent here and there."' "

And he hopes he'll be fit enough for the father to say, 'Oh well, never mind, son. It's only a bit of metal anyway.'

We cannot put the wreckage of our lives right

Many folks think of salvation like that. They find that life is a wreck. They have sinned, they've done wrong things. The old personality is a bit skew-whiff—wrong habits and sad results. And then they wake up to the fact that they're not their own: it is God who's made them and one day they will have to meet him. They've heard about Jesus Christ, but for the moment they think of him as someone whose job it is to put the wreckage right. Well, at least, help them to put it right; and if by his help they manage little by little through life to put the wreckage right, they hope that they may perhaps be in a position at life's end to come and meet God. They hope he will say, 'Oh well, you have improved considerably. Still a bit bent here and there, but enough to pass into heaven.' But they can't be sure of it, and the more they try to put the wreckage right, the more distant does the time seem when they have any hope of being perfect.

I read a book once, I think it was called *Christ Among Us*, that said the whole secret of the Christian life is *fellowship with Christ*. It said that contact with Christ—living with Christ in daily life and by his grace gradually progressing in the life of holiness—is the very heart of Christian grace. Of course, if we sin we can confess our sins and then be restored to fellowship; but the secret is fellowship with Christ. *Christ in us*. I thought, 'This is a delightful book,' and I kept on thinking that until I came to a chapter entitled *What happens when we die?* It said, 'When we come to die, none of us will feel we've ever done anything worthy of being damned.'

I thought that was distinctly odd. I thought the Bible said that that is precisely what we've all done, because it says in Romans 3 that 'all have sinned [in the past], and [still] fall short of the glory of God' (v. 23). We deserve to be damned, and we stand before God with our mouths shut with no excuse (v. 19). I thought it was decidedly odd for the book to say, 'We'll none of us, or very few of us, feel we've ever done anything worthy to be damned'. We all have done such things and in ourselves must suffer the condemnation of God's law and the wrath of God.

Ah, but the book wasn't finished. It went on to say, 'And when we first see God, we shall be utterly terrified and would dare to go away into a period of further improvement and procreation.' I said, 'What on earth is the writer thinking of, "When we first see God, we shall be terrified"?' The Bible itself says of believers, 'we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3:2).

Where had the book gone wrong? It had gone wrong right at the start for failing to face the wrath of God—the *foundation* was wrong.

The gospel is more wonderfully kind than we think, isn't it? Because we've sinned, we stand in the wreckage of our life. But Christ hasn't come to help us put it right, as best we can, through fevered years, in the hope that it will be good enough when we meet God. No, the marvel of the gospel is that we can come and meet him here and now.

'What, within the wreckage?' you say.

Yes.

'Without improving the wreckage?'

Yes, just as you are.

Just as I am, without one plea,
But that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bidst me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!¹

So that standing in the wreckage, so to speak, we can be reconciled and have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We can know ourselves accepted now, and that we shall be accepted by God for all eternity.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom 5:6–8)

The process of sanctification

'Now,' says the Holy Spirit, 'let's start putting the wreckage right.' That is very important. You could sum it up this way: the first four-and-a-half chapters in Romans deal with what we call *justification*, and chapters 5–8 deal with *sanctification*. Why that order? Well, frankly, because the work of sanctification is a long, drawn-out work. Sometimes it will be pleasant, sometimes it will be painful. The work of making us holy is not the work of a moment, is it? We shan't wake up one Monday morning and say to ourselves, 'I feel a bit different this morning and I don't know what it is. Oh, I think I've become holy overnight.' It doesn't happen that way.

Genuine holiness will mean that, as we can bear it, God will have to make us face ourselves and our wrong attitudes, and our sinful actions and our bad tempers and our lack of self-control and our bitterness and our pride, and all the rest of that ugly brood. But being made to face ourselves is painful, and God will require us to repent. Repentance is not only a thing we do the very first moment we get converted, for, as we can gather from our Lord's letters to his churches in the book of the Revelation, he is constantly calling on his people to repent. The process of sanctification will not all be unpleasant—of course not. The gracious Holy Spirit who is in charge of our lesson will lead us step by step as we can bear it.

The Israelites foot slogged across the desert from Egypt to Palestine, as God led the way. He didn't make them walk non-stop. At times they had to cover three or four miles a day and

¹ Charlotte Elliott (1789-1871), 'Just as I am' (1835).

they felt that was tremendous. At other times they stayed put in a nice oasis for a month or two, for God is kind.

He knows what we can bear, but if we're going to be holy then we shall have to be prepared to face the unpleasant experience of getting to know ourselves and repenting and persevering, and not expecting that we shall be perfect in one day. Even if you get to ninety-nine-and-a-half you'll still have to say five minutes before you get to glory, 'Yes, it's true that I have and I still come short.'

How can we find the courage to face that? That is why this lovely chapter comes here in this position. After we know ourselves justified, now we're facing the long period of sanctification. Watch the masterliness of the Holy Spirit as he pours out the love of God into the heart of the believer. He gives the believer the confidence that he is already accepted, already has peace with God (5:1). You see, if a believer doesn't have that confidence then he can fall into a grievous misunderstanding that his acceptance with God depends upon his progress. And then, when folks get to middle age and find their progress hasn't been as much as they hoped, if they thought their acceptance with God depended on their progress then they would despair, wouldn't they? And if they weren't sure to start with that they're accepted with God, psychologically there would be a temptation with many to hide it and make out they're better than they really are.

It is of the utmost importance, it is the foundation of true holiness, that we know 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' (v. 5).

Let us briefly run down those terms:

Justified by faith

'Therefore, since *we have been* justified by faith . . .' (v. 1). It is a past tense. Paul is talking to believers, and the moment they put their faith in God through Jesus Christ our Lord they were justified. Just allow me to remind you of the elementary faith. It means not that we have been made just, but that God has counted us just. That's a very important difference. In the New Testament, in such passages as this, the word *justify* doesn't mean to *make* somebody just. It means to *declare* somebody just.

For instance, you see that in the way it is used in the Gospel of Luke: '(When all the people heard this, [that is, heard John the Baptist] and the tax collectors too, they declared God just . . .)' (7:29). Did they really? What does that mean? It can't mean, can it, that all the sinners and the tax collectors made God just? God never needs to be made just: he is just, has been, and shall be forever just. Nobody is called upon to make him just, and these folks that justified God didn't make him just. They declared him to be right as they listened to John the Baptist calling on them to repent because they were sinners in danger of the coming wrath of God. Prostitutes and tax-gatherers said in their hearts, 'Yes, God is right'. They agreed with God against themselves. Many of the religious people wouldn't do it (v. 30). They felt John was extreme, out there, preaching the wrath of God, and they were decent people so they didn't declare God to be right. Ah, so the word *justify* means 'to declare to be right', and when God 'justifies the ungodly' (Rom 4:5), it's because they've repented and put their faith in him through Christ and God himself declares them *right*.

Right in what sense? Right with God: in the right relationship with God. It is the declaration of God himself. Oh my brother, my sister, you've known it since you were six, maybe, but put both feet down on it this moment—the glorious fact that the moment you trusted Christ for salvation, *God declared you just* and he will never alter that declaration.

O, joy of the justified, joy of the free!
I'm washed in that crimson tide, opened for me.²

Peace with God

'We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (v. 1). Not necessarily peace with ourselves; we can be very disgruntled with ourselves. Most days of the week I am, I don't know about you. Disgruntled with ourselves, not at peace, wanting to make progress—but oh, the joy of it, we've got peace with God.

Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin?
The blood of Jesus whispers peace within.³

Access by faith into this grace in which we stand

Having peace with God therefore, 'we have also obtained *access*' (v. 2). Access into what, and what is it in which we stand? And the answer is, we have access into this *grace* in which we stand. That's right, you've got it: 'into this grace'. That's not just a little icing on the cake or something, just a little decoration. No, no, this is a serious theological term. It's telling us that the believer's standing before God is unconditional. It is grace; and if it's of grace it is not of works: 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast' (Eph 2:8–9). We stand before God in grace. He's accepted us for Christ's sake, and our standing remains firm.

John saw in his vision the great multitude of Gentiles:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes. (Rev 7:9)

When the elder gets John to see who they are, the description is this:

These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God. (vv. 14–15)

The countless multitudes on high,
Who tune their songs to Jesus' name,
All merit of their own deny,
And Jesus' worth alone proclaim.

² Francis Bottome (1823-1894).

³ Edward Henry Bickersteth (1825-1906).

Firm on the ground of sovereign grace
 They stand before Jehovah's throne;
 The new song in that blessed place
 Is, 'Thou art worthy, Thou alone!'

With spotless robes of purest white,
 And branches of triumphal palm,
 They shout, with transports of delight,
 Heaven's ceaseless, universal psalm.⁴

We rejoice in hope of the glory of God

The word *rejoice* means to be confident (v. 2). You say, 'What is *the glory of God*?' Well, it's what we came short of to start with. 'We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23). It is the glory of God's character as declared in his laws and requirements, and we come short of it. Ah, but we shan't forever come short. Look at this lovely statement inspired by the Holy Spirit: we've been justified by faith; we not only stand in grace, but we are confident, and therefore we rejoice in it with God-given confidence, that one day we shall most certainly attain the glory of God. That's enough to cause us to shout 'Hallelujah,' isn't it?

Perhaps you've made such progress and you've never felt in any doubt at all. But you see, for the likes of me, when it seems that I've taken one step forward and two backwards, I say to myself, 'Shall I ever master this evil habit, or that bad idea? When shall I learn to behave like the Lord Jesus—shall I ever?'

Before we start the great story of *sanctification* as Romans will develop it, it says, 'Since you have been justified by faith, when you stand in the grace of God you may rejoice.' Not rejoice in the sense of happy-clappy stuff, but rejoice in the sense of exulting in it—*boasting*, in the true meaning of the word boast, not in pride, but triumphantly in this certain hope of the glory of God. We shall attain: 'we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3:2).

We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance

At first sight, that is a very puzzling thing (v. 3). How can you possibly be rejoicing in your sufferings? If tribulation comes at you, as it came at the early Christians in the form of a lion with its jaws open and about to devour you, will you rejoice in it? Or the misery suffered by our brothers and sisters in Kosovo or places like that, how could you rejoice?

The word doesn't mean rejoice—happy, happy, happy. It means the same word as before: to *exult*. You can be confident in your sufferings, knowing that suffering produces *endurance*. It is not patience as distinct from impatience, but patience in the sense of endurance. According to our blessed Lord and his parable of the Sower in Luke 8, what was the mark of the good seed? Do you remember what it was? The mark of the good seed is that people who receive the word of God, 'hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with *endurance*' (v. 15). That is a key word in New Testament Christian doctrine. There's no other way of growing fruit. Any tomato will tell you that! The old tomato plant has to *persevere*, you

⁴ Robert Sandeman (1718-1771).

see. My fruit trees don't always do that. The mark of the genuine fruit tree is to persevere—keep on keeping on. The ones on the rock, who spring up at once and then wither away in time of persecution, are not the genuine thing. They have no root (v. 13). Perseverance is the mark of the true believer.

And endurance produces character

How can I be confident, then, in the face of tribulation? What would happen if a tribulation arose so big that it smashed my faith? How can I face suffering confidently? 'By knowing certain facts,' says holy Scripture. Tribulation produces endurance in those that have genuinely trusted the Saviour, and endurance produces *probation* (v. 4). The Greek word actually means 'the state of having been proved genuine'.

That's how you know a tomato plant's a good tomato plant: it keeps on persevering and it bears fruit. You say, 'Yes, that's a jolly good plant!' And though we're not yet in glory, my good brothers and sisters, hasn't it been true of you too? As the years have gone on, you would be the first to admit many a failure. But if you were challenged today you would say, 'Yes, I have proved salvation to be real; I have proved God real in my life through thick and through thin.'

And character produces hope and hope does not put us to shame

Being proved genuine gives a second ground for hope, and, what is more, that hope 'does not put us to shame' (vv. 4–5). That's what the Hebrew says, and the Greek term is, 'it doesn't make us ashamed'. It doesn't let us down, cause us to lose faith, and disappoint us. But then, how can we be sure? And with this we come to the foundational work of the Holy Spirit.

And you say, 'I was wondering when you were going to get around to that. You seem to have missed your brief, my dear sir! You were asked to speak about the Holy Spirit, and you've been speaking about all these other things.'

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us

Well, my excuse is that these things too were inspired by the Holy Spirit. You believe that, don't you? These are the words of the Holy Spirit and he's about to really pull out the stops and have a big argument as he pours out the love of God into our hearts (v. 5). How does he do it? He does it here by a series of logical steps. It's a logical argument.

Sometimes we're afraid of logic, aren't we? We prefer to go via feelings. Today we feel good and think God has accepted us: we're pretty decent. Tomorrow we come short and feel not so good. We've got a bit of indigestion, haven't slept very well, our husbands have misbehaved and we're feeling down in the dumps. We measure our security by our feelings and that is a very serious mistake. Our blessed Saviour here on earth was a true man and able to feel our human condition. But his love is not a question of the will-o'-the-wisp of emotion or feeling. His love is absolutely consistent because it is founded in the very character of God.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly . . . but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us

What would you like God to give you? Go on, think of something big. Don't have it small—like being given one planet to look after when you get home to heaven—think something big. Would you like a whole cluster of stars to look after? What part of the eternal city of Jerusalem

would you like to be in charge of? The biggest thing that God will ever do for you, he has already done. It wouldn't impoverish the almighty God to give you ten thousand galaxies; to him that would be a very small thing. The biggest thing he'll ever do for you; he has already done.

And you say, 'What could that be?'

He gave his Son for you. Ponder it. Exactly when did he give his Son for us? Being such a great gift, surely it was after we'd improved considerably, ceased to be sinners and were making noticeable advances in our spirituality and holiness? Did God say, 'I can see those folks are really improving and doing their best, so perhaps it wouldn't be too extravagant of me at this stage to give my Son for them?'

The whole point is: when was it, and what state were we in, in God's way of looking at it, when he gave his Son for us? It was while we were still weak . . . while we were still sinners . . . while we were enemies (vv. 6–8, 10). Here is the Holy Spirit arguing with us—he has to do that sometimes, doesn't he? When we prefer to trust our feelings, or anything else, rather than rest in the very unchangeable character of God, the Holy Spirit has to argue against our emotions and against our fear, and point us ever to this foundational thing: God gave his son for us *while we were still weak*.

Sin is the same in one sense, but it has these different forms and symptoms. Sometimes it's *weakness*, sometimes it's *ungodliness*—lack of reverence for God or respect for man. Sometimes it's *missing the mark*, sometimes it's positive *enmity against God*. Yes, 'God shows his love for us' (v. 8). What else? I nearly said, it's a *humiliation* for almighty God. Just imagine the figure.

Have you ever had a salesman come to your door, and you didn't want the brooms and the polishes? The poor chap needs to make a little profit and, rather than let you shut the door, he puts his foot in the door and you have to listen to what he has to say. He's a commercial traveller, commending his wares to you.

I find it astonishing that almighty God comes to *commend* his love to us. Just imagine it, my dear fellow believer. Almighty God is standing at the door of your heart, commending his love to you: praising his virtues and extolling his details. This is a picture of the Holy Spirit pouring out God's love into our hearts.

Since, therefore, we have now been justified

The argument is this in verse 9. It was when we were sinners that we were justified; now that we are justified, do you think God will throw us out? What kind of a God would that be? He loved us while we were sinners, unjustified; now that we've repented and are justified by faith, will God sling us out? What kind of a love would that be? What inconsistency would that be in God?

While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son

It was while we were enemies that we were reconciled to God by the death of *his Son* (v. 10). As I think of it, I think of our Lord's parable of the Wicked Tenants (Luke 20:9–19). The owner sent many messengers to reap the grapes and they got murdered or beaten and thrown out. At last he said, 'I have one son, I'll send him. Perhaps they'll take notice of him.' But they said, 'This is the heir, come, let's kill him,' and they murdered him and threw him out of the vineyard.

We are reconciled to God by the death of *his Son*—two magnificent words. God loved the very rebels that murdered his Son. He reconciled by the death of his Son those that caused him immeasurable grief.

Now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life

Well, if you've been reconciled, you're not an enemy now, are you? We are all imperfect saints, but we're not enemies of God any more (v. 10). Now that you are a child of God, will he throw you out? What kind of God would that be? It's foundational to our progress in holiness that the Holy Spirit does his work in pouring out the love of God into our hearts to give us that assurance.

The Ongoing Work of the Holy Spirit in the Heart of the Believer

Luke 11:5–13; Ephesians 1:15–19; 3:1–17

This morning we thought together from the Epistle to the Romans chapter 5 of *the foundational work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of every believer*. We praised God for that delightful ministry that the Holy Spirit goes about as he takes God's love for us and pours it into our hearts. Thus he forms a firm and secure foundation that will give each believer the courage and the grace to face God's ongoing work in his or her life.

Now I wish to go forward and consider some parts of *the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the believer*. Once more I fear I may disappoint you in my particular choice of topic. Perhaps some of you have said, 'We endured the first session and now we're entitled to be rewarded in this session; if only the preacher would get round to describing and discussing the gracious gifts that the Holy Spirit imparts to his people.' I shall not, however, be discussing that particular topic, because the other preacher in your next session is to talk of the Holy Spirit's work in the church and I presume that will involve him talking about the gifts.

Or it may be that you'll be disappointed in this session because you are anxious to get on to what people regard as the particular characteristic of the Holy Spirit's work in the believer—the production of ever increasing holiness. In the third session I will run this afternoon, I hope to talk about the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the heart and mind of each individual.

Paul's prayers for the Ephesian believers

You will notice in the two passages that we've read from the Epistle to the Ephesians that Paul tells us twice over of the prayers that he prays for his Christian friends. He prays in the first instance that God would give them, and therefore by implication to us too, 'a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of [God]' (1:17). And in the second of those prayers, he said he prayed to the Father, 'from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that . . . he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being' (3:15–16). Two ongoing ministries of the Holy Spirit in the heart of each believer. Neither of them mentions gifts and neither of them particularly mentions holiness. It is the work of the Spirit in the mind and the heart of the believer, and for that ongoing work of the Holy Spirit the apostle prays, and prays constantly and regularly.

Now when we talk of praying for the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, we should recognise that, frankly, it disturbs some believers. The reason that it disturbs them is this. They say—perhaps they will say to me after this session, ‘My good sir, you have made a grievous mistake. Once you are a believer in Christ, you never have to ask for the Holy Spirit again. Surely it is Christian truth that when we first trust the Lord Jesus Christ we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit?’ And that, of course, is perfectly true. In the very context from which I have read you the two prayers, Paul tells us about these people:

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (1:13–14)

Firstly, he says, ‘on believing you were sealed with the Holy Spirit’. That is to say, they believed, and upon their believing they were sealed by God, who gave them his Holy Spirit there and then. It’s a delightful metaphor that is used of the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit: the *sealing* by God. In the ancient world, a seal was used to indicate identity. A book’s seal was an indication of its ownership: you sealed it with your seal. Or it was a question of security: you were sealing it as your property and therefore defying anybody to misappropriate it.

When this metaphor is used of the gift of the Holy Spirit, it’s enough to make a man or a woman’s heart bubble over with joy, isn’t it? Can you imagine it? Upon her believing, God says, ‘That woman is mine, let all the universe know it. I have given her the Holy Spirit, and in so doing have sealed her for my own property. I defy anybody to rob me of that property.’

And secondly, the apostle says, ‘which is the earnest of our inheritance’ (KJV). *Earnest* is an Old English word we no longer use in our part of the world. It means in modern terms a deposit, or a part payment.

Perhaps you hadn’t thought of buying a new coat this November, you were waiting for the sales in January; but you go down to the city and there is such a lovely model of a thing that you cannot possibly say no to! It costs one hundred and fifty pounds maybe, and you just haven’t got the spare cash with you. But you want it, so you try it on and it fits you perfectly. It’s the only one they have in the whole shop and you want to make sure that nobody comes in and buys it before you have time to get the whole amount, so you ask the assistant if he would be prepared to take a deposit. You pay the deposit and this secures it as yours against the day you pay the whole sum into the shop.

And it is glorious, isn’t it? God gives us the Holy Spirit: he is God’s deposit. One day, God will give us the whole of the glorious inheritance he has promised to those who love him (Jas 2:5). In the meanwhile, we have the deposit, the earnest; or, to change the metaphor as Paul has it in Romans 8, ‘the firstfruits of the Spirit’ (v. 23). We have the firstfruits of the very joys of eternity. ‘What will it be to dwell above and with the Lord of glory reign?’⁵ Our wildest imaginations can scarcely cope with it, but *already* the Holy Spirit is in the believer’s heart as the part payment, the deposit of what one day we shall enjoy in glory.

⁵ Joseph Swain (1761-1796).

We've got that straight, haven't we? This happens the moment a person believes in the Lord Jesus. We don't have to pray for the *sealing* of the Holy Spirit, nor for the *earnest* of the Holy Spirit; they're given as a gift the moment we believe on the Lord Jesus.

And yet it is precisely for these people, who have received the Holy Spirit, that Paul prays in these two prayers for *the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit*. That is to say, he doesn't take it for granted. He is cooperating with God; he's praying that God will give them 'a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him', and he's praying because he needs to pray for it. And he prays in the second prayer that God would 'grant them to be strengthened with power through his Spirit', so that certain progressive results will take place in their hearts.

This is exceedingly important. We mustn't let either of those truths cancel out the other. There are some people who are so concerned about the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the heart that they come almost to deny that all believers receive the Holy Spirit when they first believe. That is a mistake, of course. Then there are those at the other extreme, who so emphasize that all believers receive the Holy Spirit when they believe that they forget to emphasize the need for the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

It is in connection with the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit that I'd like to read the parable our Lord preached, where he's talking about prayer (Luke 11:5-13).

And he said to them, 'Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him"?' (vv. 5-6)

For an Easterner, if a visitor came, never mind how late at night and at what inconvenient hour, the host must offer him a meal. Not to offer him a meal is an outrage on the standards of hospitality current among them. So a visitor comes at this unearthly hour and, to his embarrassment, there is no food to put before him. So he goes to his next-door neighbour and knocks upon the door. The man mumbles out of his bedclothes, and the chap outside says, 'Get up. I've got a visitor and I've nothing to put before him. Give me a couple of loaves so that I can entertain my visitor.' And the muffled voice from the blanket says, 'Go away, I'm in bed, my children are in bed with me. I can't get up.'

But the man won't take no for an answer, he keeps on knocking on the door. So in the end there's nothing for it, the man in bed gets up and gives him what he needs. Not because he's his friend, but because of what our Old English calls the *importunity*, his absolute shamelessness: he wouldn't go away. Of course, that would be embarrassing, going to somebody's house at two o'clock in the morning, wouldn't it? Banging on the door, asking to be loaned a tin of sardines or something—you'd be ashamed of it. Ah, but this man isn't ashamed. He senses a need.

At two o'clock one morning your toddler has stomach ache and a bit of a fever, and you think to yourself, 'This could be serious; I should ring the doctor, but it's two o'clock in the morning.' What happens if the child has appendicitis or something? It could be dangerous. Suppose you rang the doctor and made him come out, and it turned out that all that was wrong with the child was that he'd eaten too many gooseberries at dinner. You would be embarrassed, wouldn't you? So you hesitate to ask the doctor to come out.

Suppose it's Granddad, who in the middle of the night suffers a severe heart attack. You ring the doctor. 'I can't come out, wait until tomorrow morning,' he says. 'No, no doctor,' you say, without any shame. Because of the pressing need of the situation, you keep hammering and shouting down the telephone that he must come right now. You can justify your persistence.

'How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' (v. 13). But here something will depend on our prayers, won't it? The apostle didn't pray for nothing. He saw the need of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the believers, and he prays, importunately refusing to take no for the answer.

My dear Christian friends, perhaps you'll manage to get on in life and be happy and content without the ongoing work of the Spirit in your heart. As a loving Father, God gives to those who ask, but he reads what we think is the necessity for it. Blessed are those who constantly take these two prayers to their heavenly Father, and let him know, 'You promised it, Lord. You have become my Father, please give me what your servant Paul prayed: a spirit of wisdom, an ever increasing knowledge of you, and the strengthening in my heart by your Holy Spirit. I cannot get on without it.'

What will this ongoing work of the Spirit in our hearts do for us?

He will reveal the hidden wisdom of God

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Cor 2:1-5)

When he came amongst them in Corinth, Paul didn't try to reach them by well-honed oratory in the manner of the Greeks, who were so obsessed with presentation. Paul didn't talk gibberish; he watched what he said. His words were not in man's wisdom, 'but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that their faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God' (v. 5). When people were converted and on their way to becoming mature, he could say, 'Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom' (v. 6). Then he did go on to talk to them of the further riches of God.

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (vv. 7-8)

So there is a wisdom beyond what you may call 'the ABC of the gospel'. How would you describe it?

But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.' (v. 9)

‘Lovely,’ you say, ‘and when we get home to heaven we shall enjoy it all! We’re looking forward to it, for we can’t know it now, of course.’

But you’ve got it the wrong way around. Of course you can know it now. That’s what Paul is saying: ‘These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God’ (v. 10). Things that haven’t entered into the hearts of unconverted men and women—they don’t know, but you can know. Oh, start getting excited! Things that no eye has seen, nor ear heard, God wants to pour into our hearts and minds, by his Spirit that he gives us. Lovely things that ‘God has prepared for those who love him’.

Even if you are buying your husband the screwdriver that you know he wants for Christmas, you present it to him beautifully wrapped so he’ll know it was prepared by somebody who loves him. And then the joy of the mutual love in these things. Just think of it, ‘what God has prepared for those who love him’.

Someone will say, ‘These are deep things, and I’m not a scholar’. Scholarship is helpful if you’ve got it, but sometimes it’s a hindrance. Scholars can make difficulties where none exist. I remember my schoolteacher who tried to teach me Greek philosophy, and he said to me at one stage, knowing I was a Christian, ‘I think I understand Plato, but I can’t make head or tail of Paul.’ Well, of course he couldn’t, he wasn’t a believer.

For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (v. 11)

If you want to know characteristically human things, you’ll have to have a human spirit. You may love Fido, your dog, but it’s no good expecting him to sit down with you and enjoy Shakespeare, nor to admire particularly the modern art that you have on your dining room wall. The dog can’t make head or tail of the stuff and never will. He understands if you’re eating a beef steak because a dog has a stomach like you have. He knows all those gorgeous feelings as the beef steak trickles down the palate and into the receptacle designed for it. So he will come around wagging his tail because he understands that bit of you. But he doesn’t understand your love of art or music. If it’s a dog, there’s no good sending it to music school. To understand that side of you, it would need to have a human spirit.

You can understand God’s love for colour—look at creation out there. You can understand something of God’s mighty engineering. But you will never know the heart of God unless God gives you his Holy Spirit. With our new birth, we have received the Spirit of God so that we might know the things that are freely given us of God.

That does not overlook differences of mental ability. Suppose you have a Rolls Royce car and you get to drive in much more comfort than I do in my Mini Minor, or on my scooter. You’ll probably get there faster and with greater ease, but I shall get there in the end. And what is more, if your Rolls Royce runs out of petrol and my scooter is full of petrol, I shall get there before you! That is the situation. ‘Rolls Royce’ or ‘scooter’, if we have God’s Holy Spirit—genius that he is in communicating the lovely things of God—he will make known to us these things, such as eyes never saw nor ears heard nor entered into the heart of man, the wonderful things that God has prepared for them that love him.

He will bring us closer to the Father

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. (John 14:16–17)

The context of that promise is, as you know, the lovely words of our Lord Jesus, when first of all he says, 'I'm going away to prepare a place for you. For in my father's house are many dwellings, and if I go away I will come again and receive you to myself that where I am, there also you may be' (see vv. 2–3). But in addition to talking to them about the Father's house, he fell to talking to them about the Father. There's a difference, isn't there, between coming to the Father's house and coming to the Father?

As a little relaxation in holiday times, I've had the habit of visiting stately homes to witness the treasures of my betters. I've admired their many mansions and dwelling places and paintings and all the rest of it, but never once has the lord of the house come and met me. You can be in his house and not anywhere near him.

Going to heaven is one thing: that's glorious, isn't it? But what would be the sense of going to heaven if we couldn't come to the Father?

Jesus said . . . 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'. (John 14:6)

You know, 'coming to the Father' is not just getting close physically, is it? You can sit on the same settee with somebody and in your heart be miles away from them. Coming to the Father means getting near to him, feeling the throb of his very heart, knowing his mind and character and getting really close to him.

And we have difficulties, don't we? Or some of us do. When life shines upon us and the sun is bright and strong we feel very near to the Lord. The days that follow may bring pain or bereavement, and then sometimes questions arise in our hearts. 'Why does God allow this?' Dark thoughts arise about the Father. You imagine a little child, brought up by some drunken bully of a father, and try and tell that little child that God is his Father. What will he imagine God to be?

The fact is that Satan has sown slanders in our hearts about God. If ever we are to come nearer to the Father the slanders must be removed and we shall need to know the truth about the Father. Religion has often misrepresented God; how should I know the truth about what he's really like? We have it through the objective word of God and the revelation through Jesus Christ our Lord, but listen to this:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. (vv. 16–17)

He is the Spirit of truth and he will tell us the truth about the Father, of course. Getting underneath our difficulties, our neuroses, our misunderstandings, and little by little bringing

us ever nearer to the Father. Marvellous isn't it? The ongoing progress in the life of the believer could be summed up in one thing: getting to know the Father ever more intimately and truly.

He will give a spirit of wisdom and of revelation

I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him. (Eph 1:16–17).

So we come back to the first of those two prayers in Ephesians. Paul prays that God would give us 'a spirit of wisdom and of revelation'. *Wisdom* is a thing that accumulates over the centuries, isn't it? And if, as believers, we wish to progress in wisdom, we should remember that we ourselves are not exactly the founts of all wisdom. There have been believers before us, centuries of them, going back to the Old Testament days. In the inspired record we have the wisdom of the ages. May God give us a spirit to value that wisdom and to enquire about it. But we have more: we have our blessed Lord. Solomon was wise, but 'a greater than Solomon is here' (Luke 11:31 KJV).

Some people are afraid of that term, *revelation*. It conjures up in their minds the claims of some that they get revelations of new doctrine never heard before, which, they say, are more important than Scripture. Scripture outlines doctrine, you see, but they claim that you have revelations from God that go beyond Scripture and introduce new doctrines that Scripture never heard of.

That is quite false, of course. Paul prays for *the spirit of revelation*; he's not asking for the revelation of further doctrine. Our New Testament is complete, but there's a lot in the New Testament that we don't yet see. It happened to Peter. He walked for nearly two years along the roads around Nazareth with a man they call Jesus and listened to him preach. He rode with him in the boats, sometimes went fishing with him, and helped in his miracles, but you know, he hadn't yet grasped who he was. His eyes weren't yet open to the significance of what he was looking at; but there came a moment when God opened the man's eyes to see the significance of *what was there already*. When our Lord asked Peter, 'Who do you say that I am?' he said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt 16:15–16). There is so much in the Scriptures that we read but don't always grasp even with our imagination, let alone with our spirit.

Paul prays that God would give us progressively 'a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him', so that we come to know and understand three things (Eph 1:17–19):

- what is the hope to which he has called you
- what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints
- what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe

What is the hope to which he has called you

I wish I had the time to ask each one of you to tell me what is the hope of God's calling according to you. What's the hope and purpose and intention behind it?

'God called me so that I could get forgiveness and go to heaven,' says someone.

Jolly good—is that all? Why go to heaven? What is the point of it—what is the hope to which he has called us? Our sins forgiven, so that we don't go to hell and are taken to heaven at last? But what's the point of going?

You say, 'Well, relief from arthritis; not having the bother of daily work and the rush hour. Wouldn't it be lovely to sit back on a heavenly sofa and put your feet up—some kind of old people's home or something?'

Is that the hope and the purpose of getting saved? Oh, how we need to have the eyes of our hearts and imagination opened to get hold of what God is saying is *his hope*—what he has in mind, what his intention is:

... according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (vv. 19–23)

This is part of the hope, isn't it? What has God intended? Well, God is talking here about how he is going to administer the new heavens and the new earth. God is not hard up for ideas, is he? We only have to look at our own universe to see that. One tiny little planet going around, a medium-sized star, and that star is just one amongst multi-millions of stars in one galaxy; and there are billions of galaxies in an immeasurably vast universe. What does God have it for? I don't know exactly, for he doesn't have to work for a living. He has all this because—excuse my irreverence—he enjoys it.

You say, 'I hope he doesn't make me work when I get home to heaven.'

But you'll like work when you get home to heaven, for you'll never feel tired up there, will you? To sit around in heaven doing nothing all the time might even be boring. Oh, the schemes God has!

Someone asks, 'How does he run this universe?'

Well, he's got what he calls here, 'rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named'—the varied ranks of mighty spirit intelligence; for this present world, says Scripture, has been put under angels—in subjection to angels. These vast powers now run the place, but God isn't content with that. The universe to be, 'the age to come', will be run in a far better way, and the glory of it is that the head of it all is not going to be an angel, but a man.

Martha is going to get a bit of a surprise, isn't she? She had the Lord in her home, sitting at her table, and she did the best she could. He graciously indicated he needed that, and was much helped by it. What shall she say when she sees Jesus of Nazareth, her blessed Lord, as the head over all rule and authority and power and dominion? Chief, Lord of all under God. In that day, instead of having angelic executives, principalities, powers, mights and dominions, they're going to be put aside. Who, then, is Christ going to have as his executives? Well you, if you're a believer! This is astonishing; how shall I find suitable vocabulary to describe it? He is head over all the principalities and powers, and we, the redeemed, are seated already in God's plan 'in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (2:6).

You say, 'But where on earth did you get the notion that he's going to use us as his executives?'

Well, listen how Paul describes you and the church, of which you're a member:

And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (1:22–23)

'The church, which is his body' is vastly superior to the principalities and powers. Mighty as they are, they are just creatures. You're not just a creature, are you? It's how you began, but now you've been born again, baptised in the Holy Spirit, made to drink of one Spirit and formed into the very body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). So you are part of the glorified Lord, part of his very body. When the head wants to have things done in that day, he shall not call just upon creatures, he shall call on those who have been made by his stupendous spiritual grace members of his very body, of which he is the head.

We'd better start praying, for if that's the hope of his calling we ought to have it in mind, had we not? This is the tremendous goal that God has for you in Christ: 'we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ' (Eph 4:15). He is the head, and our need is to grow up unto him, that the body might be commensurate to the powers of the head. We must grow, we cannot afford to remain spiritual infants. Paul prays, therefore, that we might be given the spirit of wisdom and revelation, that God would open our eyes (1:17–18). We need our eyes opened to grasp and see the reality of it. It would put this present world in its place for us, wouldn't it, if we were to 'grow up into him who is the head' (4:15)—his way of thinking, his mind, his way of action. Growing up with that spirituality would also change our view of our fellow believers.

What are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints

Oh, the wonder of it, that we mean anything to God. Here God is talking of you and me, using terms like *riches* and *inheritance* (v. 18). God's inheritance is you. He paid the blood of Christ to get you: you are the Lord's *portion*. The Lord's inheritance is his people, so we have to be careful how we speak of them and how we treat them. That good woman sitting beside you is a believer in Christ, redeemed with the blood of Christ. If you could see her as she will be one day, I fancy you'd be liable to fall down and start worshipping her.

Do you remember when John saw the angel he fell down at his feet to worship him (Rev 19:10)? 'No, don't do that,' said the angel, 'I'm only a servant.'

Am I clear about what God means when he talks about 'the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe'? All this is the ongoing work of God in our hearts.

What is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe

'I would want you to know,' says Paul, 'it is according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead' (vv. 19–20). You see, it's not that we have in that sense to ask God to 'set the power loose'. In raising Christ from the dead, God exerted that power. What a colossal input of divine energy it was when God brought the body of our blessed Lord back out of the tomb and set him at his own right hand, *and that great*

power has not been recalled. Like the ripples of a mighty ocean, it has spread down the centuries, and it has pleased God that it should come to us as well. We need enlightened eyes to see the potential of the power that makes possible the goal that God has in mind for us as his people.

The ongoing work of the Holy Spirit is to open the eyes of our hearts, so that we might know these things.

The Holy Spirit's Role in the Sanctification of the Believer

Romans 7:4–6

In our sessions together we have been thinking of the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer, and in our first session we thought of *the foundational work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer* as he pours out God's love for us into our hearts, forming a foundation of all our later experience of God.

Then in our middle session we gave ourselves to considering some aspect of *the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer*, that we might be given the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God: to know, to understand, to grasp with intellect and imagination, and above all by the spirit, what is the hope to which he has called you; what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints; and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe. God is reaping for himself a great harvest in the redemption of men and women through Jesus Christ, his Son, to form his eternal inheritance by the power he unleashed when he raised Jesus Christ from the dead. That power continues still, rippling across time to the hearts of all who trust him.

Vessels used for cleansing

In the forecourt of the ancient temple and tabernacle there stood not one vessel but two. First the altar, offering cleansing by blood. And then the laver that provided cleansing by water. Not one cleansing but two, and in that order: cleansing by blood, then cleansing by water.

With the laver there was a once-and-for-all cleansing. Some theologians are reluctant to admit this, but they stand to be corrected. When the priests, the sons of Aaron, were inducted into their holy office of priesthood, they were brought to the door of the tabernacle and bathed all over with water. This was the initial ceremony of their induction as priests. If you were asked how they were bathed and with what water they were bathed all over, the obvious answer is that they were bathed with the water that was placed at the door in the laver. Then, of course, the priests had to wash their hands every time they came to minister.

In Christ we are given two kinds of cleansing

Cleansing by blood: 'The blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin' (1 John 1:7).

Cleansing by water: 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word' (Eph 5:25–26).

God has cleansed us and made us fit to enter, even now in spirit, into the holiest of all: 'We have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus' (Heb 10:19). Jesus, the forerunner, has entered on our behalf (6:20); so that in spirit we may come to the very throne of God and know ourselves accepted there.

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb 10:22)

Sprinkled is the technical term that is used in the Old Testament when it was a question of cleansing by blood. The priest would take blood and sprinkle it on the person or elsewhere, as they came for forgiveness of sins. Never in the Old Testament do we have *washed* in blood; always sprinkled by blood. Therefore, in talking of the great sacrifice of Christ and his atoning, cleansing blood, the New Testament uses the term, sprinkled.

You could argue, 'I have been cleansed by the blood of Christ, and cling to those wonderful Scriptures—"The blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7), and, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins" (Eph 1:7)—and if I have thus been cleansed, why do I need any other cleansing?'

You might well ask why we should need two types of cleansing, so now we need to speak of these initial cleansings and what they do.

Cleansing by blood

'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin'—but what type of cleansing, and how does it work? We shouldn't think, should we, that there's some sort of detergent? The Epistle to the Hebrews helps us there, when it spells out what this cleansing by blood does.

How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works. (9:14)

The blood of Christ cleanses the conscience from the guilt of sin. That is very important. When we sin, the Holy Spirit combines with our conscience to make us feel the guilt of our sin, and we seek cleansing so that we might avoid the wrath of God due to that sin.

How does the blood of Christ cleanse my conscience? When I have sinned and my conscience registers the guilt that I have broken God's law, there follows the sense that I deserve the penalty of that law. It is there that the blood of Christ comes to my rescue, for it is the symbol and the evidence of his death. Blessed gospel—grasp it again with both hands—Christ *died* for our sins. The gospel is not only that our Lord Jesus lived—not that he gave us an example, though there is encouragement in it; the gospel is 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3). Our sin was laid on him: 'The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isa 53:6). All the penalty of sin.

Payment God cannot twice demand,
First at my bleeding Surety's hand,

And then again at mine.⁶

That payment suffices God and his everlasting justice, so when I see that Christ has died and paid the penalty of my sin, and God has accepted that holy sacrifice, then my conscience is cleansed of its guilt and I have boldness to enter the holiest of all.

No wonder our blessed Lord Jesus laid it down for us that we were constantly to come and take the bread and the wine at the Lord's Supper. We are to remember how he gave his body and gave his blood on our account. As we take the cup at the Lord's Supper in response to our Lord's most gracious invitation, what a joy it is to hear him say in our hearts again, 'This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matt 26:28). And as we take the cup and drink, we hear again in our hearts the words of the new covenant to remind us: 'And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us . . . "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more"' (Heb 10:15, 17). It isn't that God forgets we were sinners: he'll never forget it, and nor shall we.

I forewarn you that when you get to heaven you'll not forget that you once were a sinner, will you? Do you hope to stand with the choirs of heaven, singing, 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain' and then you'll nudge the person beside you and say, 'Tell me, why was the Lamb slain?' Will you? Not in heaven you won't. Nor shall God ever look at his blessed Son and say, 'I can't remember now why he was slain.' Oh no, indeed not. He'll not *remember* our sins, but that does not mean he will *forget* we did sin.

This is a legal term, borrowed from the customs of the kings in the palaces of the ancient east. Among their officials was one called the *Recorder*—in Old English we call him the *Remembrancer*. His job was to keep the record of people's misdemeanours and sins against his majesty. And if his majesty couldn't sleep at night, or at any time for his entertainment, he could call for his recorder and ask him to read from the book that he kept. The recorder would read out the names of the people that offended and their sins. Having heard it, the king would demand to know, 'Have they been punished for these sins?' And if the recorder said, 'No,' his majesty could command that, now that their sins had been called to mind before his judicial bar, they must be punished. That's what *remembering* sins is.

God has his records of everything we have done. Praise God that all who have trusted his Son for salvation through his atoning death may know, by the voice of the Holy Spirit, 'I will never recall their sins' — *remember*, in the legal sense: bring them up before the judgment and command that the penalty be paid. Why will he never do it? Because the record of the sins came before God when on Calvary he laid upon his Son the iniquity of us all.

It is the blood of Christ that cleanses us from all sin, and, lest we forget it, the Lord Jesus commands us to come and remember him by taking the bread—emblem of his body that was given for us, and drinking from the cup of wine—in memory of the blood that was shed for us. When this is so basic to our relationship with God—the wellspring of our gratitude to Christ—my dear brothers and sisters, we shouldn't make it just a ten-minute interlude in meetings that are really organised for other purposes.

⁶ Augustus Toplady (1740-1778) 'From whence this fear and unbelief.'

Cleansing by water

The blood of Christ cleanses the conscience from the guilt of sin. If that is so, why should I need any further cleansing by water? A first step towards our understanding of that is in Ephesians 5, where Paul is urging Christian men to love their wives, 'as Christ loved the church'.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (vv. 25–27)

We're not talking now about *guilt*, we are talking about *disfigurements*. You gentlemen, I can see that you have such beautiful wives, and you love your wives, don't you? Should your wife come down to breakfast one day and you notice a nasty sore on her cheek, you wouldn't blame her. You wouldn't want her to feel guilty for it, and you wouldn't even say, 'Oh my dear, you do have a nasty sore on your cheek. Nevertheless, I forgive you.' Well, that would be nonsense. You don't forgive carbuncles. I've never heard of it! And you wouldn't say, 'Well, it doesn't matter; she hasn't broken the law.' The more you love her, the more you would determine to get rid of the old carbuncle. You'd say, 'My dear, you'll have to go to the doctor and, what's more, I'll pay. I am determined that your beautiful cheek should not be disfigured by such a thing.'

Paul uses the metaphor of the church. Christ loved her, but now he sees in us his people all kinds of what he calls 'spots or wrinkles or any such thing'. And it's not the spots and wrinkles on our bodies, it's the spots and wrinkles disfiguring our characters. If we lose our temper and confess it, he forgives us for losing it, but he doesn't say, 'I don't mind if you carry on having bad temper,' does he? Because he loves us he's determined to get rid of it, and our meanness, our cowardice, our self-centredness and our pride, our narrow-mindedness, our jealousies, our envies and our greed. In that sense he wants to forgive us. He's determined to get rid of it, like the husband doesn't forgive the carbuncle but he's determined to get rid of it. So now it's not a question of cleansing by blood that cleanses us from the guilt; it's a question of cleansing by water that cleanses away the spots, the blemishes and the disfigurement that spoil the beauty of our characters.

If you want an illustration of that at the level of conversion, you have one in Titus. Titus was at this time on the island of Crete, where some had professed faith in Christ. But it was said that in those days the Cretans, generally speaking, were possessed by rather difficult personalities: 'One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own⁷, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons"' (1:12). 'Always liars'—you could never rely upon them to tell the truth. They promised to come to the meeting and then wouldn't turn up. 'And evil beasts'—like lions, if they've had their breakfast they smile at you and purr. If they haven't had their breakfast and you're the nearest breakfast they can think of, they'll tear you to pieces. Cretans were like that. And 'lazy gluttons'—feeding themselves and never doing any work

⁷ Probably Epimenides.

whatsoever. You'd find it difficult to get a Christian church working as it should with people like that in it, wouldn't you?

How should God deal with that? Would he say, 'Well, never mind; they've been cleansed from the guilt of all the sins they've committed and they'll never come into judgment, so why bother about these evil traits?'

Of course not. God is determined to get rid of them. So let's turn over to Titus 3, to hear Paul talking about this kind of cleansing from the spots and the blemishes.

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour. (vv. 3–6)

Plenty of blots and blemishes and spots and wrinkles there! How were they saved? You say, 'By the blood of Christ—that's how he saved us.'

Well, in a sense he did; but that's not what it says here, is it? 'He saved us . . . by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour' (vv. 5–6). It's 'the washing', isn't it? Note the metaphor: it's not *sprinkling*, it is *washing*. As Hebrews puts it, 'Our bodies washed with pure water' (10:22). This is nothing less than *regeneration*.

Let us be sure that we grasp both sides of our glorious gospel. 'This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood' (1 John 5:6). Blood to cleanse the guilt and free us from the wrath of God; water, the washing of regeneration, beginning the work of our sanctification. The removal of the blots and blemishes, and for that there is, as our Lord preached when he was here on earth, a once and for all cleansing. And then there is a repeated cleansing, is there not?

You will remember at the Last Supper, in the middle of the supper our Lord Jesus rose from the table, set aside his outer clothes, wrapped a towel around his waist, filled a basin with water—not with blood, with water—and stooped to wash his disciples' feet (John 13:1–20).

Peter objected: 'Lord, do you wash my feet? . . . You shall never wash my feet.'

Our Lord said, 'If I don't wash your feet, Peter, you have no part with me.'

And Peter, typically, went to the other extreme. 'Well then, Lord,' he says, 'not my feet only but also my hands and my head.'

'Come, Peter,' said our Lord, 'the one who has been cleansed all over doesn't need afterwards to wash, except to rinse his feet.'

If you were invited to a great evening feast in the ancient east, you took a bath in the afternoon. That was in kindness to your fellow guests, and set you in the mood for the festivities. But walking through the dusty roads your feet would get defiled and gritty, so when you arrived at the door there would be a slave appointed by your host and he would gently take your

sandals off and wash your feet. Not all over—you don't need to be bathed again, but he'd graciously rinse your feet before you proceeded to the feast.

So our Lord is saying that there's a once and for all cleansing—the glorious work of salvation, and 'the one who has bathed does not need to wash, except to rinse his feet.' It begins to put the smile back on your face, doesn't it? You're conscious of all your blots and blemishes, but God has seen them and begins the work of sanctification by the Holy Spirit as he regenerates us and gives us new life. This is the beginning of true holiness.

Oh, I am so glad it's that way. It is not merely that Christ forgives us and then says, 'Do the best you can to get rid of your blots and blemishes.' No, no, it is that God forgives us through the blood of Christ and then does that miracle of his grace upon us in which he regenerates us: puts within us a new life that wasn't there before. The difference is important, isn't it?

You could, if you thought to do it, dig up a corpse, and say, 'This is a smelly old corpse: many a wrinkle, blot and blemish here. Let's get out the soap and try to clean it up.' What use would that be? It would be a different principle, wouldn't it, if you let the corpse stay still and you planted within it an acorn, and the acorn began to grow, producing a new life.

That's God's way: the initial stage of sanctification performed by the Spirit of God as he regenerates us and puts within us the life of God that wasn't there before, which will grow with its own divine nature and bring forth fruit for God. The first part is to be bathed all over and after that to rinse the feet. In other words, we allow the word of God to be applied to our hearts by his Holy Spirit, correcting, rebuking, encouraging, and exhorting where we find things amiss, as we confess it before the Lord, seeking the cleansing of his Holy Spirit and power to overcome.

When does that initial action of sanctification take place? Well, in Acts 15:8–9 Peter is talking about the Gentiles.

And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.

God had given them his Holy Spirit, somewhat to the consternation of the Jewish Christians. They thought a Gentile could never be made ready to receive the Holy Spirit. Weren't Gentiles by definition unclean? How could Gentiles ever receive the Holy Spirit? Peter told them that, on the day that he preached in Cornelius' house, the Gentiles believed and there was the manifestation of the Holy Spirit: 'God gave them the Holy Spirit as he did to us at the beginning' (see Acts 11:15–17).

How can you explain God putting the Holy Spirit into the hearts of Gentiles? How had they been cleansed? Peter tells us that God made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 'God gave them the same gift [the Holy Spirit], as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus' (v. 17). That is the initial work of sanctification, which is important to know, for sometimes religious and kind people make a mistake and they try to cleanse themselves day by day and make themselves pure. That is a very noble ambition, but they forget the first basic necessities—that initial cleansing, that initial regeneration through personal faith in the Lord Jesus.

On what principle does the Holy Spirit work holiness in our hearts?

But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code. (Rom 7:6)

We shall need to pause about that. What does it mean, 'to serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code'? We have a saying in English that could mislead us here. We say that sometimes, 'you have to break the letter of the law in order to keep its spirit'. So you go along the road on ordinary days and you come across the sign that says thirty miles per hour speed limit.

You say, 'Ha, and all the gentlemen and ladies here observe it to the letter, don't they?'

That's the law, and the point of it is to save the lives of the citizens from careless drivers driving too fast in built-up areas. But early one morning at two o'clock, the ambulance is rung for and comes to transport somebody with a heart attack to hospital. Now time is everything; they come to the thirty miles per hour sign but they can't observe it this time. They neglect it and go roaring through at seventy miles per hour to get this patient to the hospital.

If you were to question it, they'd say, 'Well, we broke the letter of the law but we kept its spirit.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, we asked ourselves what was the point behind that law, that you mustn't go over thirty miles per hour here? It was to preserve the life of citizens, but if we observe that law now, the citizen who's had the heart attack might die in the ambulance before we get him to hospital. So if the point of the law is to stop people dying, we keep the spirit of the law by breaking its letter.'

And there they go through the thirty miles per hour limit at seventy miles per hour to save his life. So we understand that; but that's not what this is talking about at all. So why on earth did I talk about it then? Well, to stop you talking about it that way round!

What does it mean? This is God's technique of getting people to obey his law: 'that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us' (Rom 8:4). And it's not now simply a matter of laws chiselled on a piece of stone, or even laws written in a book for that matter.

That's how it was in the Old Testament day. Moses came down the mountain with the two tablets of the law written by the very finger of God, and you may be sure they were written very carefully, beautifully, artistically and legibly. Before he'd got to the bottom of the mountain the people had broken the first and the greatest of those laws.

In that sense, there was nothing wrong with the law. It was holy, just and good, expressive of the glorious holiness of the character of God. We must never insult that holy law. It was a beautiful and a glorious thing; its condemnation of sin was lovely. The more we grow towards the knowledge of God, the more we shall admire God's holiness and his anger against sin. How we may thank God for the beauty of God's wrath against sin: it's the beauty of God's holiness that makes heaven what heaven is. We may be glad that God doesn't diminish his standards of holiness, or heaven would turn out to be the hell this world has become.

Nor must we ever apologise for the wrath of God and the holiness of God, like we do for our friends sometimes. We say, 'Meet Archibald Simmons. Nice chap. Sometimes he blows his top. It's unpleasant, but he gets over it and on the whole he's a nice fellow.'

You don't talk about God like that. When the great angels come out of the temple of God with the vials of God's wrath, how would you picture them? Like dark, malevolent hags, with blood and gore oozing from them? Indeed, not! The angels come out dressed in white, brilliant and beautiful white (Rev 15:6). God's holiness and his wrath are beautiful.

But how would God get us to be holy?

That is the point. The laws written on tablets of stone told people what to do and what not to do; it didn't give them any power to do it or to refrain from doing it. 'God has done what the law . . . could not do' (Rom 8:3). And so in 2 Corinthians 3 Paul has occasion to describe what happened in Corinth when he came and preached the gospel. Many of the Corinthians were converted, and he uses a dramatic metaphor to describe it. He says, in effect, 'Christ took me as his pen and, using the Holy Spirit like ink, he wrote on your hearts' (v. 3).

That is the new covenant that we celebrate at the Lord's Supper every time we keep it. It says not merely, 'I will be merciful towards their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more'—the first provision of the new covenant that we celebrate is this, 'I will write my laws on their hearts' (Heb 8:10–12).

I tell you, it's a difficult job to write laws on a bit of stone with your chisel, even if it's sharp enough, and make them very precise and clear. You can write them on a bit of paper, if you're a skilful penman; but try writing laws on fleshy 'tables' of hearts that are all a-move. That is what God has set himself to do. He has pledged himself, on the blood of the covenant, to write his laws on our hearts. And Paul says, 'That is what I did in Corinth. Christ took me as his pen and by the Holy Spirit (the analogy to the ink) he wrote his laws on your hearts.'

That is a miracle of the grace of God. It is progressive in the life of the believer. We fail much and in many things go astray, but there is within us a new nature created by the Spirit of God. We want to do God's holy law, and have within us the potential to do it. Marvellous, isn't it? That is what it means, but if we try to keep God's holy law merely in our own strength we find, like Paul, how difficult, if not impossible, it is.

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. (Rom 7:15–20)

With our intellects, our minds, we can serve the law of God, for living a holy life is the only intelligent thing to do, isn't it? Living a sinful life is a crazy—I nearly said lunatic—thing to do. Our intellects can assent to the law of God that it is good, and we can bring our emotions to play, as Paul does, and say, 'I delight in the law of God' (v. 22). There's a certain loveliness about God's law that he brings his willpower to bear upon the topic. But when we do the things that we want, and not the things that we should, we tell ourselves, 'You're going to behave differently next time.' But we find intellect, emotion and will—all three together—to be ultimately inadequate. How then shall we keep God's holy law? By not just observing the letter on the tablet, so to speak, but by the life of God's Holy Spirit within.

The principle of sonship

So, if that is the principle of the new covenant, let us think of the further principle that it will manifest as we proceed—the principle of sonship, not slavery. We shall remember what Galatians 4:6 tells us: ‘Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”’ That is natural in a believer’s life, isn’t it? Because you are sons, you have *the status of sons*: God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, and instinctively the believer knows God as Father and cries, ‘Abba, dear Father.’

But look what Romans 8:15 says on this matter of the principle of Christian living: ‘For you did not receive *the spirit of slavery* to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”’ How does a slave go about his work? Well, many slaves would go about their work through fear. They would do what they had to do, often begrudgingly, fearing that if they didn’t the task master’s lash would come sweeping down on their backs. So they did the minimum of work, and did it resentfully.

We have not received the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. We may say in passing, if believers ever find themselves driven by excessive fear, they might know at once that it is not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will provoke reverential fear of God, but not unhealthy fear and panic. That is not the work of the Holy Spirit. God tells us this, so that he might help us to distinguish from real, genuine reverence of God and the unhealthy, psychological, neurotic fear that sometimes assails some people. For if they should think that that fear and panic is the voice of the Holy Spirit, then it will drive them into more serious psychological difficulty. But we have not received the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. What spirit, then? We have received *the Spirit of adoption* as God’s dear sons.

When I was a child in my father’s home, if we were caught running in from the garden with mud on our shoes right across the floor that mother had recently hoovered, means were brought to bear to dissuade us from that point of view and action. In a way we were no better than slaves, in that we had to be, kind of, driven to it. But when we grew up, it was different. Why? Because we were grown-up sons; we’d come to value the home just as our parents valued it, and we didn’t want to muddy the carpet.

My brothers and sisters, God isn’t going to fill heaven with a lot of slaves: people saying, ‘Do I have to do this? What, another prayer meeting in heaven? Oh dear me, how many more prayer meetings throughout eternity, I wonder? Do I have to come? Do I have to listen to God’s word? What, again?’

There will be no slaves in heaven. God’s business is to produce sons who share the nature and attitude and outlook of their father, and to do his will. Therefore, they give evidence that they are sons of their Father. Being *led by the Spirit* is not just a matter of, ‘What shall I do in life?’—though it comes to that and other things, obviously—but being led by the Spirit in this context is being led to behave like sons and daughters of God are meant to behave.

That’s how the Spirit leads us; but lest we should think this is somehow automatic, notice what it says: ‘If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live’ (v. 13). We need that healthy balance. We are to take responsibility, as grown-up sons and daughters of God, to deal ourselves with the misbehaviour of the various members of our bodies, be they tongue or brain, or what have you. We have to ‘put them to death’. It isn’t a question of just ‘letting go and letting God’ and everything somehow will turn out all right in the end. We are

called upon as responsible sons and daughters of God, in the grace and power that the Holy Spirit gives us, to systematically put to death those actions of our bodies and desires that are not good. That's important, isn't it? It's not, I repeat, an irresponsible 'letting go' and seeing what happens next. If we are sons and daughters, the Holy Spirit exhorts us to 'put to death the [wrong] deeds of the body'.

Or we could look to Galatians 5, where Paul contrasts the fruit of the Spirit and the works of the flesh. Yes, there is a difference: the holiness that we seek is a fruit of the Holy Spirit living within us, not a work of the flesh. Notice the contrast between *works* and *fruit*. Let us also notice:

Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (Gal 5:16–17)

Two desires

Lustings, if you like (KJV); but it's the sense of *desire*. The Spirit desires against the flesh and the flesh against the Spirit.

I had a shower in my bathroom that was like that. Jolly uncomfortable and dangerous it could be! It was one of those old-fashioned sort, and you had to turn the cold tap and the hot tap and somehow get them balanced. But I guarantee you, the cold water lusted against the hot water and the hot water lusted against the cold water. At one moment it was very nice, and the next moment you got showered in an icy cold blast of cold water. When you seized the other tap, it came out scalding hot, and getting the thing balanced was a bit of a difficulty.

The Spirit desires against the flesh, so it's like a holy warfare of the flesh against the Spirit, and we don't do the things that otherwise we should. But we are not left alone:

One who is taught the word must share all good things with one who teaches. Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. (Gal 6:6–8)

To some people that appears to say that salvation and eternal life depend on our works after all. That is not so. We must here make the distinction between the *penalty* of sin and the *consequences* of sin. The penalty imposed by the wrath of God is one thing, the consequences of sin are another.

Suppose there is a Christian farmer, and he feels in his heart for some reason—I can't tell you why—that God wants him to sow wheat in his field. Then he notices that he'll get more money from the market if he sows barley, so he disobeys what he feels the Lord would have him to do and he sows barley. But when the barley starts to come up, and it's quite clearly barley, he's smitten with remorse of conscience. He disobeyed the Lord and sowed barley instead of wheat. He goes to the Lord in humble repentance, and says, 'Lord, I've sinned. I knew you wanted me to sow wheat and I've gone and sown barley. Do forgive me, Lord.' And the Lord forgives him, of course: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9). So now the man is

forgiven. He shall not endure the wrath of God, so that's it. Does that change the barley into wheat? Does God do a miracle, and say, 'Well, I'll wave my wand over it and turn the barley into wheat'? No. What we sow, we reap.

That's a very important thing to get hold of, isn't it? It is not a question of our salvation being secure. There is forgiveness for our individual sins as we repent; but there are consequences.

Say a believer were to fall away from the Lord for a while and get drunk, and in a rowdy fight in some pub he falls from the first floor window, crashes on the ground, breaks his leg and it has to be amputated. It all brings him to his senses and he comes back to the Lord and confesses his sin, and the Lord forgives him. Will the Lord make the amputated leg grow again? Well, not this side of glory. The man will live with the consequences until he goes home to heaven.

God can turn the consequences to a healthy discipline. In the leading of the Holy Spirit, he would restrain us from sinning, and when we sin wilfully there is forgiveness when we repent. But in this life God doesn't guarantee to remove the consequences.

Let us close on this wonderful note

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Rom 8:26–30)

We have the Holy Spirit within us and he intercedes for us to God. God had his purpose for us when he called us: 'those whom he justified he glorified'. One day we shall be conformed to the image of God's dear son. That is the goal, and each of us who knows the Lord is moving in that direction, footstep by footstep. But when it comes to praying, often at first we don't know what to pray for.

'What do I need to pray for next? Do I need a time of sunshine to lighten the load? A bit of seeming success? Joy and gladness in my heart that will help me on my journey home to heaven? Or, is my present need a time of difficulty: testing for my faith; sorrow, so that my faith might be purged and made strong?'

How would I know what to pray for as I ought? God has not left it up to me. I say my childlike prayers as best I know how; but the Holy Spirit is interceding for me according to the will of God (v. 9). He knows what the next step is that will be good for me, and he will bring us home to God at last.

I love that story in the ancient testament, how Abraham sent his servant to find a bride for his son, Isaac (Gen 24). The servant had told them how his master had a son. He loved his son and to him he had given all that he had (v. 36). Then he gave her jewels and pearls and earrings

and dresses and all the rest of the things that would appeal to her heart (v. 53). I like the bit where the drama reaches its peak, its turning point. Her family ask Rebekah, 'Will you go with this man?' and she says, 'Why, certainly, I will go' (v. 58). She had some of the treasures, the earnest of what she would get if she went with the servant and became the son's bride. He stood there glorifying his master's son.

So we are told by our Lord himself that one of the functions and duties of the Holy Spirit is this: 'He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you' (John 16:14–15). The Holy Spirit will come and help us to see the wonders of Christ, the heir of God, heir to the universe. He will ask us the question, 'Would you like to be the bride of God's dear son?' What a lovely thing. How vividly it contrasts to the yarn that the serpent put to the woman in the garden (Gen 3).

'Look at these trees,' he said. 'Aren't they lovely? Beautiful to look at, aesthetically pleasing, good for food, intellectually rewarding and desirable to make one wise. Why don't you take the fruit from it, my dear?'

She said, 'I mustn't, because God has said, "You mustn't eat of that tree."'

'Oh, nonsense,' said the serpent. 'That's God always trying to keep you down. Tantalising you, putting lovely things in front of your nose, and, when you go to take them, saying you can't have them. Go on, take it and you shall be as God.'

So the serpent instilled into the human race that insane notion that man can be as God, and independent of God.

Our God is counter to that. See it foreshadowed in the servant of Abraham as he stood before the girl. 'My master's son owns everything of the father: would you not like to be his bride?' In all that he does, the Holy Spirit's supreme purpose is to enrapture your heart with the glories of Christ. Not in the correctness of some legal term, but so that your heart will long for him and you will live to please him.

When Rebekah at last said, 'I will go,' the servant didn't say, 'Well, I'm pleased to hear you say that, my dear. Let me give you a visiting card, and if you should arrive at the tent where Abraham and his son live, you'll find they'll be there to welcome you. I'll see you when you arrive.' He did not do that. When she said, 'I will,' he put her on a camel and walked himself, side by side with her, every step of the way until he got her home to the father's house.

So it is with the Holy Spirit. He is in us and with us, and shall abide with us, glorifying Christ to our hearts. He doesn't just leave us to make our way through the wilderness, he will walk with us every step of the way until he gets us home to glory.

About the Author

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