

The Gift of the Spirit

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in an eight-week series

April 26, 2020

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John 20:19–22 (NRSV)

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:36–41 (NRSV)

³⁶ Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” ³⁸ Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”

⁴⁰ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” ⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

Ephesians 1:13–14 (NRSV)

¹³ In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

The Holy Spirit: God’s Gift to His Children

Beginning on Easter, we’ve focused on Peter’s monumental Pentecost speech from the second chapter of Acts. This week, we turn to the conclusion of his speech and its immediate effect.

Promise Fulfilled – The Spirit’s Return

When Acts 2 opens, Jesus’ disciples have gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost. The city is packed, with the population having swelled to perhaps 150,000 people. Jews are there from all over the Roman Empire. In the weeks before the festival, the disciples had been with the resurrected Jesus, who before returning to the Father had told the disciples that they were to remain in Jerusalem to wait for the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had explained that God’s Spirit would come upon them with power so that they could be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and “to the ends of the earth” (see Acts 1).

One can only imagine the anticipation and, perhaps, anxiety that the disciples felt. Only weeks before, they had been cowering in an upstairs room waiting to be rounded up by the Roman soldiers after Jesus’ crucifixion. But Jesus had passed through death. His resurrection had changed everything. They didn’t know what to expect, but they wouldn’t have to wait long to find out what was in store for them. As Luke tells it, they were gathered together when “from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind . . . Divided tongues, as of fire . . . rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages” (from today’s passage). As Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit had returned with power. *Returned??*

Ever since the flight from Egypt more than a millennium before Christ, God had been present with his people in a way that he was not present elsewhere. Indeed, God's dwelling place had been the temple in Jerusalem. But God's people had been unable to live as they should in the presence of God. Consequently, God's presence had departed the temple, "Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house . . ." (Ezekiel 10:18). God's Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence. Thus, when God was no longer present with his people as he had been, it meant that God's Spirit had left.

Yet, though God would no longer dwell in the temple with his people, God had not forever abandoned them. God promised that one day he would put within them a new Spirit, replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (see Jeremiah 31). In essence, God promised that he would one day return to his temple (Malachi 3:1). Now, as the disciples sat together during Pentecost, that day had come. But it would not be as they expected!

And, as we've seen, who would expect that Peter could deliver such a powerful speech that day. Proclamation, challenge, confrontation -- it had it all. And Peter closed with an invitation wrapped in that challenge: repent and be baptized, so you too will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. . . . The Spirit, so misunderstood then and now.

The Spirit is God-present-with-us

Presence is delicious.¹ Telephones, e-mail, letters and all the other ways we have to communicate with one another are wonderful, but nothing is like actually being with someone. The ancient Israelites understood this. They knew that there was only one God, Yahweh, who had saved them from their oppressors and who had led them to a promised land. But God hadn't just told them what to do or where to go; God had actually and truly dwelt with them. When they were desert nomads, God had given them instructions for building a moveable home for him, a tabernacle. When they had settled into the land they called Israel, God had given them instructions for building his permanent home with them, the temple. God's people weren't so foolish as to believe that God lived with them and nowhere else. They knew that God could not be confined to any one place, but they also knew that God was present with them in a very special and unique way.

This God-present-with-us in the Old Testament is sometimes called the *shekinah* (Hebrew for "presence"), sometimes Wisdom, and sometimes even the Holy Spirit (see, e.g., Isaiah 63:9-14). In the New Testament, this God-present-with-us is most often called the Holy Spirit, but also simply the Spirit or the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Christ or even the Spirit of truth.

The Holy Spirit?

It is hard for us to grasp the significance of Pentecost because we're not even sure what we mean by the Holy Spirit. It is tempting to simply embrace the Spirit as a godly force of some kind, an electrical grid of sorts that we can plug into. But that isn't even close.

The Holy Spirit (a.k.a. "the Spirit," "the Spirit of God," "the Spirit of Christ") is not a "what" but a "who." The Spirit is God. Not the Father and not the Son, but still God. Fully and completely God though not all of God. The Spirit is every bit as personal and genuine and God as Jesus is personal and genuine and God. In Acts, we are told about people who lie to the Spirit (Acts 5). Who lies to electricity or even to their dog? We lie to other persons.

It is in Paul's letters that we most clearly see the relationship of Easter and Pentecost. Paul refers to Jesus as the "first fruits of those who have died" (1 Corinthians 15:20).

¹ I borrowed this wonderful phrase from Gordon Fee, whose work underlies much of this week's study. Dr. Fee is a highly regarded New Testament scholar. He is also a Pentecostal and, thus, keenly aware of the reality and power of the Holy Spirit. Not surprisingly then, Dr. Fee has devoted considerable efforts to helping the Christian community see that the Holy Spirit is more than just a small, still voice, but is the very presence of God in our lives.

Likewise, the followers of Jesus are the “first fruits of the Spirit” (Romans 8:23). “First fruits” is an agricultural metaphor referring to the beginning of the harvest. Both Jesus’ resurrection and the arrival of the Spirit marked the coming of God’s kingdom, which had arrived already but was not yet consummated.

Like Jesus’ resurrection, the arrival of the Spirit during the festival of Pentecost was direct evidence that God’s new age had dawned. Likewise, Paul’s own experience of the Spirit and the experiences of other Christians was evidence that in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, God’s work had come to its climax.

The Spirit as a guarantee

Though Jesus’ resurrection and the arrival of the Spirit are the first fruits of God’s harvest, we want to know when it is all going to be consummated. When will suffering, sickness, sin, and tragedy be swept away? Paul is no fool. He knows that there is much wrong in the world. But he sees the Spirit as the guarantee that all will be put right –

that, not only *has* God’s victory been won, it *will* be won!

The Holy Who?

Never . . . not once . . . in the Bible is the Holy Spirit referred to using the impersonal pronoun “it.” Rather, the Holy Spirit is always a “who,” referred to using personal pronouns. At various times, the Holy Spirit *searches, knows, teaches, dwells, accomplishes, gives life, cries out, bears witness, has desires, is grieved, helps, intercedes, works all things together, strengthens, and is lied to!* These words and phrases describe what persons do, not inanimate objects or impersonal forces.

Admittedly, it can be difficult to think of the Holy Spirit as a person. We generally use the word “spirit” in impersonal ways. Our images of the Holy Spirit – a dove, wind, fire – are all impersonal. So, we have to retrain ourselves to refer to and think of the Holy Spirit as the very personal presence of God with us. Perhaps it will help if we remember this: Paul uses the title “Holy Spirit” as often as he uses “Lord Jesus Christ”!

Here are three striking statements from Paul about the presence of the Spirit being that guarantee. Paul writes, “When you believed you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance . . .” (Ephesians 1:13-14, TNIV). Again, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30, TNIV). And, “But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment (2 Corinthians 1:21-22, NRSV).”

In the ancient world, letters were sent on a piece of rolled up papyrus that would often be marked with the seal of the sender. If the sender’s seal arrived intact, then the recipient could be sure of the sender and confident that no one had opened the letter. The Holy Spirit, who is God’s gift to everyone who has faith in Jesus, is God’s seal on each of his people, marking us out as belonging to God.

But the Spirit is more than a seal, the Spirit is also a down payment, a first installment on all of God’s promises. It is a bit like the old lay-way plan. The store would hold the merchandise as payments were made, guaranteeing that the item would one day belong to the customer.

The experience of Pentecost was not limited to the disciples gathered in Jerusalem. Every Christian experiences a Pentecost of his or her own, for all Christians are empowered by the Spirit of God. Some Christians have a very powerful experience of the Holy Spirit while, for others, it is a quiet experience. But the Holy Spirit seals us *all* for God. We who have faith in Jesus Christ have all been “born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). The Spirit is a gift to us, born of God’s love.

The Spirit and the believers go to work

In keeping with such love, after the day of Pentecost the community of disciples went to work. They were now empowered by the Holy Spirit and there was no reason to wait

any longer. They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles. They shared with one all that they had; no one went without. They broke bread together, meaning they shared not only the Lord's meal but also regular meals. They lived life together. They let everyone see God's goodness in their joy and fellowship. The community grew as more and more people joined them. And they prayed . . . and they prayed. Bit more on this next week. For now, let us rest in the sure knowledge that even in this Time of Virus, we rest in God's love with his very Spirit, his presence, with us and among us, social distancing or not. Nothing, but nothing, can separate us from God's love.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

A study of Matthew's Gospel

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Genesis

Meeting on-line at 11:45am Tuesday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at noon on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle".

Videos are all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.