

The Promise of the Father

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When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son. Never had intercourse been so fraught with healing and joy to publicans and sinners. The Son of man had power on earth to forgive sins. He was come to save what was lost. Never had saints of God listened to such words of sweetness whereby was disclosed to them the bosom of His Father, which He, the only-begotten Son, knew so well. "The Word became flesh," one of them could say, "and dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of an only-begotten from a Father) full of grace and truth." In the simple tale of the Gospels, we have the blessedness of the disciples in the presence of the Lord. There is no distance nor reserve. He speaks to them face to face; He calls them and treats them as His friends. And oh, what a friend was He! Blessed pattern of all meekness, of lowliness unknown, of patience that could not be wearied, of grace that flowed out the more, the more He was wounded in the house of His friends, like a sweet herb that breathes fragrance when trodden by the heedless foot of man!

It is indeed sadly true that His presence rendered more conspicuous the infirmities, the dangers, the sins, and the enemies of God's people. But never did murmur break from His lips Who had undertaken their cause — God's cause. Notwithstanding their unbelief, their pride, their insensibility, and their perverseness, never did He complain, "Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? Wherefore have I not found favour in thy sight, that thou layest the burden of all this people upon me?" Instead of saying, "Have I conceived all this people? Have I begotten them, that thou shouldest say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father beareth the sucking child, unto the land which thou swarest unto their fathers?" Jesus, the good Shepherd, looks onward through the vista of His sufferings to the day when He would say, "Behold I and the children which God hath given me." Instead of saying, "Whence should I have flesh to give unto all this people?" He, and He alone, could say, "The bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

It was assuredly a crisis when Jesus appeared. God had given His law; but holy, just, and good as the commandment was, it could not better, and was not meant to better, the heart of man. It detected and condemned what issued thence; for through law is the knowledge of sin. Prophets, too, had been sent by the Lord God of their fathers. But what could these avail save to show the importunate love of Him Who rose up betimes and sent them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling-place? They alas! mocked and misused His prophets "until the wrath of Jehovah arose against His people, till there was no remedy." In this state of things He appeared. Truly we may say that in the person of Jesus God brought Himself nigh to the sinner. But in vain. Jesus must suffer for sins, the Just for the unjust. So must He bring us to God. All might bear Him witness and wonder at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth; and surely had there been one pure thought in the heart of man, one feeling undepraved by sin, Jesus must have drawn it forth. But there was none — nothing Godward. His presence, therefore, could but demonstrate, that the carnal mind is enmity against God. "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin; but now they have no cloak for their sin. He that hateth me hateth my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father."

"Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken and by wicked hands have crucified and slain; whom God raised up (Acts 2)." The grand basis of blessing was laid. God's righteousness was declared not only at this time, but for the passing over of sins that

were past in His forbearance.

Still, while in that death all the past dealings of God were divinely vindicated, Christ Himself, in anticipating His approaching departure, hints at a new order of things: an order consequent upon His rejection by the world, and exaltation to the right hand of God. And was it not worthy of Him, that, when Jew and Gentile joined to show their implacable enmity to God, He should then show the exceeding riches of His grace to them?

From Christ, I say, risen and seated at God's right hand on high, a new and unprecedented and peculiar work of God begins. Their sins had been borne away. They were sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. They did believe on Him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification. If a work of God commenced then, it was necessarily something above and beyond the blessings they at that time enjoyed, however great these might have been.

Both before His death and after His resurrection the Lord had told His disciples of the promise of the Father. He had spoken of another Comforter Whom the Father was to give them, an ever-abiding Comforter (John 14). In chapter 15 He speaks of the same Comforter as not yet come, One Whom He would send from the Father. In chapter 16 we have further particulars still. "These things (their, as well as His, sufferings from the world) I said not unto you at the beginning, because I was with you. But now I go my way to him that sent me; and none of you asketh me, Whither goest thou? But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send Him unto you." He had told them that He was going to prepare a place for them in heaven, and that He would come again and receive them unto Himself.

On these two truths, deeply interesting as they are, it is not my present purpose to dwell. Suffice it to observe here, how closely bound up with them is the truth of the intermediate descent of the Holy Ghost. It hangs upon the departure of Christ to the Father. So peerless was the gift, "that," said our Lord, "it is expedient that I go away." Wherein then was this inestimable preciousness that outweighed the presence of the Lord Jesus? For Him they had forsaken all; and more than all He had been to them. He is about to go. What could turn a loss so grievous and seemingly so irretrievable into positive gain? Was it solely that the Crucified was about to take His seat on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, crowned with glory and with honour? Was it needful merely for the display of God's righteousness in vindication of His Son? "I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away." The reason, and the only reason stated here is, "If I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you."

It is clearly impossible to lower the language of these chapters (John 14 - 16) to anything short of the Holy Ghost Himself. Effects and manifestations are beyond doubt enlarged on elsewhere; but such is not the theme here. It is the Spirit personally, the Comforter Himself. It is One Who could be described as a teacher, remembrancer, testifier and convicter — One Who could be said to come, hear, and speak. It is a really present and acting Person Who leaves heaven when Jesus ascends there, and Who, as thus sent down, takes His place with and in the disciples, only on the footing of the accomplishment of that work to which the heavenly glory is the sole adequate answer in the estimate of God, however necessary it might be to all His earthly purposes: a footing clearly impossible in the days of the Lord's flesh.

Even then, while here below, the body of Jesus was the temple of God; but this could be predicated of none else. Elizabeth and Zacharias and John (from his mother's womb) were filled with

the Holy Ghost; but upon Jesus alone in that day did the Holy Ghost descend and abide. It was not so with His disciples, any more than with believers before them. They, unlike Jesus, could not righteously be the temple of God, until the bloodshedding was actually effected and accepted; even as in the consecration of the priests (in Lev. 8). Aaron is first anointed alone and without blood (ver. 12); afterwards, the blood is put upon his sons and him (verses 23, 24), previous to their being all anointed together (ver. 30), for the anointing oil is the well-known symbol of the unction from the Holy One. Thus Jesus was first anointed Himself with the Holy Ghost (Acts 10: 38); afterwards being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, "He hath shed forth this which ye now see and hear" (Acts 2: 33). Having borne the wrath of God, and also annulled by death him that had its power, thus removing every obstacle, He was enabled to send the Holy Ghost to dwell in the believers; so that the apostle could appeal to them, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you" (1 Cor. 3: 16)?

Plainly also the miraculous conception of Jesus is totally distinct from His anointing, though both were of the Holy Ghost. As man born of the virgin, He was the Son of God. But besides this, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus baptised and entering upon His public service: in other words, He was anointed with the Holy Ghost and with power. Analogously, we find as to believers, that their life and relationship to God, and their anointing by the Holy Ghost, are quite distinct. When Jesus arose, He could say, "Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father and your Father, and my God and your God." But they were not yet anointed with the Holy Ghost and with power. Later, but before His ascension, He says, "Behold, I send the promise of the Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high." Waiting, they found the sure promise of the Father. The Holy Ghost was given. They were anointed then and not before. Nor was this anointing, one need hardly add, a boon conferred there and then only; for the apostle in addressing the Corinthians writes, "Now he which stablisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God; who hath sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts." These are assuredly not signs and wonders wrought by the hands or tongue, but the blessed presence and actings of the Spirit in the saints. Compare also 1 John 2: 20-27.

In principle, then, the coming of the promised Spirit was contingent on the departure of Jesus; and in fact, it was when He took His seat as the glorified Man in heaven, that the Spirit was sent down. Assembled together with the disciples previous to His ascension, He "commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me: for John truly baptised with water; but ye shall be baptised with the Holy Ghost, not many days hence" (Acts 1: 4, 5). The next chapter records the accomplishment of the promise on the day of Pentecost. The Comforter was given. Now in them was He Who was promised to abide with them for ever* (John 14). The third person of the Trinity was now, and permanently, present in them, as truly as the second person had been with them before He ascended to heaven. The Holy Ghost was the abiding witness, as His presence in the disciples was the new and wondrous fruit, of the glorification of Jesus in heaven.

* This is true, I suppose, individually as well as corporately; and thus the apostle exhorts, "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption" (not, lest He should leave you); whereas in the Old Testament the cry is, "Take not thy Holy Spirit from me" (Ps. 51: 11). "Quench not the Spirit" (in 1 Thess. 5) connects itself with "Despise not prophesyings." The subject is a different one altogether.

Are the operations of the Spirit of God from the beginning denied? In no wise. Creation, providence, and redemption, all speak of Him. His energy is to be traced in every sphere of God's

dealings. Who moved upon the face of the waters — strove with man before the deluge — filled Bezaleel with understanding and all manner of workmanship — enabled Moses to bear the burden of Israel, or others to share it? By Whom wrought Samson? By Whom prophesied Saul? It was by the Spirit of Jehovah. And as in their early national history His good Spirit instructed the people, even so could the prophet assure the poor returned remnant, "According to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so my Spirit remaineth among you." Were any born anew? They were born of the Spirit; and the blessed and holy actings of faith in the elders who obtained a good report were, beyond controversy, the results of His operation. So far, the way of God is still and necessarily the same. Jesus set not aside in the least the need of the Spirit's intervention. He proclaimed its necessity as a sure irreversible truth — "Except a man be born of water and of Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Far from weakening its place, He rather gave it a prominence never so clearly enunciated before, though of course always true.

Life, peace, and sonship (while all are communicated and known by the effectual working of the Holy Ghost), are in no sense the presence of the Comforter. We have seen that the disciples possessed these privileges before the Lord Jesus ascended. They are therefore entirely distinct from the promise of the Father, which the disciples did not possess, and which none ever did or could possess, till Jesus was glorified. The presence of the Comforter is clearly the distinctive blessing since Pentecost. It was never enjoyed before, though the Spirit had wrought, and wrought savingly as regards believers at all times. The signs and powers which attested His presence at the first were extraordinary (χαρίσματα), and thus quite distinct from the gift (δωρεᾶ) of Himself to abide with the Christian for ever.

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