

Chapter 19

Is that all there is? Turning on the power

We broke off from thinking about the meaning of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension to invite you to become a whole-hearted disciple. With those of the first century we are about to find that even more good news awaits us. Although to them it did not at first seem to be quite so good, we have the benefit of hindsight.

Goodbye (for now)

After almost six weeks of renewed companionship and fresh insights, their Lord gave a last commission to the remaining eleven, saying:

*'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'*¹

He was then lost to their sight. So why had he also told them to wait in Jerusalem? Was he going to come back to them there?² Until he did so, how could they possibly cope without his reassuring presence?

Do the right thing – if you can

A recent speaker on the radio had only a few minutes to explain his beliefs, but his message seemed to be that assisted willpower is enough to keep us from failure as we attempt to do what is right. It is all to do with attitude. Make up your mind to be strong but humble, tempted but pure, always doing good to others whatever they do to you and, he said, in this way you will find forgiveness and peace. Yet the big problem is how to achieve the right attitude and then have a will strong enough to live up to it.

The disciples had already proved how weak-willed they were when they all deserted Jesus at his arrest. Many of us will identify with the struggle to do the right thing that Paul experienced and wrote about:

*'For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.'*³

Further on in that passage, Paul speaks of being held captive by sin and needing to be rescued and freed from it. In his mind (his 'attitude'...) he knew very well what was right but, like many others, kept failing to do it. He finally cried, 'Who will rescue me?' – then answered his own question: 'Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord.' He had learned the lesson of our last two chapters, that those held captive to sin are only liberated by accepting the mediation of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. We cannot release ourselves by our own efforts.

Their Lord had promised the disciples that when he left them, his Spirit would come to give them power to live his way. This was the gift they were to wait for, bringing all the help they needed. The Spirit would change their attitude and help them keep to the new standards.⁴ Yet Jesus had also said that sometime he would come back, a promise repeated by other witnesses of his ascension,^{5,6} so perhaps the disciples hoped that this would happen very soon. Instead of his bodily return, though, they had not long to wait before experiencing the arrival of Jesus' own Spirit, rightly called the Holy Spirit.

A neglected person and an unrecognised provision

Our three-in-one God is one God existing as three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This three-person God is referred to as a 'trinity' from 'tri' meaning three and 'unity' – God is three-in-one. This is not the same as three separate gods as some mistakenly assume. The concept of unity in trinity is difficult for human minds to grasp, although music lovers know that when three separate notes from the same key are played as a chord they produce one harmonious sound, so much richer

than when each is played alone. So it is with the three persons that harmoniously make up the Trinity. For a long time the third person was the most neglected member of the three. Especially in past days when known as the Holy Ghost the impression given was a rather spooky one. For centuries the Bible was not available to the common people, but very early on people recognised that the activities of the Holy Spirit were in complete harmony with those of Jesus, who in turn had shown the world the exact likeness of God the Father. He had foretold the effect of his Spirit being like a stream of living water that would satisfy spiritual thirst forever.^{7, 8}

In 2012, the British nation was shocked to learn about the tragic death of a young man after quite straightforward surgery. An earlier brain tumour had needed radiotherapy but left such damage to his pituitary gland that he would need lifelong replacement hormone therapy. Unfortunately the surgical team had not read his previous notes so did not prescribe this post-operatively and his blood sodium level became dangerously high. He repeatedly cried out desperately for a drink of water but was simply thought to be a neurotic nuisance. In despair he even telephoned his mother and the police, but no one gave him any fluid until it was too late and he died. His urgent need had not been recognised.

What a picture this gives of so many people suffering undiagnosed spiritual thirst. Many try to find satisfaction from other sources but can die without knowing the saving life support of the Spirit of Jesus. Yet just as the young man could have been saved by a correctly balanced infusion, so the living water Jesus describes is there for the asking when thirsty spirits connect up with his Spirit. He offers to revive and refresh them for the rest of their lives, changing despair to relief and dryness of soul to total renewal – and never considers them a nuisance.

Why are we waiting?

When God says, ‘Wait,’ he often plans a surprise. About ten days after Jesus had left them the apostles were waiting and wondering, together with his mother Mary, other women and, more surprisingly, his brothers. In his earthly life these men had not believed Jesus’ message and at one time thought that he was out of his mind,^{9, 10} but his

brother James had been given a personal visit from the resurrected Jesus and in time would become a leader in the early church.^{11, 12} Peter, taking charge, organised a replacement for Judas, but the restored Twelve were still at a loss about what to do next. They waited and prayed until suddenly it all became clear. God always has a purpose in keeping us waiting until his right time has come.

Fifty days after that eventful Passover, Jerusalem was crowded with godly Jews who had come from many places to celebrate harvest at the feast of Pentecost. Then, in the second chapter of the book of Acts, Luke vividly describes how the Holy Spirit came in a powerfully transforming way. The disciples had been obediently waiting for they knew not what but when the Spirit of Jesus suddenly came, as he had promised, they were filled with a new power, acting like the heavy rain of a thunder storm that ends drought and encourages new growth. This is what happened in a spiritual sense.

A new language, a new authority and fresh courage

The crowd of visiting Jews spoke a variety of languages between them but to their amazement found that everyone heard and understood what the apostles were saying. They spoke with a new authority, no longer the panic-stricken men who had once deserted their Lord. Peter took the lead again and explained to the huge audience the meaning of Jesus' life and death, resurrection and ascension. He told them how the Old Testament prophecies had been fulfilled, including one about this impressive arrival of the Holy Spirit.¹³ He boldly told the crowds how, in spite of being responsible for his death, they could now repent, be forgiven, and know the gift of this Spirit themselves.

Peter knew that the first believers would be Jews but added that all who had been afar off from God and were repentant would be forgiven, regardless of status or culture. Dry outward religion could be transformed into wonderful newness of life. His message was so powerful that at once 3,000 people believed it and joined the company of the newly energised apostles.¹⁴ The Twelve had seen for themselves the resurrected Lord Jesus and now spoke of him with the great confidence that marked their new spiritual power. This is the story

that some of the convinced Jews would take back home with them and so the best of news would start to spread.

New energy for all who believe

Paul later told the Ephesian believers (and us) that the mighty power used by the Father to raise his Son from the dead (and transform his disciples) is the same as that still offered to all believers.¹⁵ The Holy Spirit still strengthens and energises those who have entered into a new relationship with God through his Son, Jesus Christ, bringing about a kind of personal resurrection. Our old lives, ruled by self and sin, are made new as we ask Jesus to be Lord of all that we think, say and do. His Spirit immediately comes in to give the fresh life and energy to our spirits that is experienced physically when dehydration is corrected. He helps us to understand the new standards given to us as children of God, renews our spirits and helps us as we learn to live responsively.^{16, 17}

This is the help we need, not just to strengthen our own willpower but to change the set of the mind altogether and give us a completely new attitude.¹⁸ Instead of aiming to meet our own standards, however high these may be, we now want to find and to do the will of our heavenly Father, energised by his Spirit at work within us.

Why baptism?

At the end of the long sermon recorded in Acts 2, Peter assured his listeners that if they were to repent and be baptised, they too would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have already thought about repentance and learned of the Holy Spirit, but what did he mean by baptism? In some churches, parents bring infants for baptism but make promises on the child's behalf that must later be confirmed in person by that child. A ritual baptism by itself does not make an infant (or anyone else) a Christian. Rather it is like a promise awaiting fulfilment. Peter was speaking to adults, able to make up their own minds when they understood baptism's true meaning.

One sunny Sunday afternoon about a hundred of us from our local church gathered in the vicarage garden where four adults waited to be

baptised in a small pool of water made ready there. In turn they told how they each wanted to take this step as a public witness to their new life in Christ. Baptism is an outward sign of an inward change; it does not bring about the change.

The first person told us how she had been brought up with a religious label, but had only recently discovered and accepted the Lord Jesus as her personal Saviour. She exchanged formal religion for a new and wonderful relationship with him. The three men who followed spoke of very different experiences. One had been addicted to pornography, but those chains had fallen off when he asked God for forgiveness, freedom and a new inner life. Another had followed an Eastern religion for years but received no support when in personal trouble. In contrast, he had found a warm welcome in the love of Jesus and those who shared it. The last man into the pool was paraplegic after an accident, but his smiling face shone as he told how the power of God had enabled him to overcome the many troubles of his life. Two of the four had been baptised as infants when they had known nothing about it, but all four wanted to make a public confession of the new spiritual life they had found through belief and trust in their Lord's promise of forgiveness.

After openly declaring their faith in Father, Son and Holy Spirit each was firmly held and lowered briefly under the water before being raised up again. This was a visual aid demonstrating the fact that their old life is dead and buried and they have been raised up to a new life supplied by the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ After their public confession of belief, baptism sealed the commitment each of them had already made personally. The great news is that this same Spirit and strength will come into each life that surrenders in gratitude to the offer of a clean new start made by our Lord Jesus Christ. We thought about that in the last chapter, and if you have decided to open your life to him he has already come in, in the person of his Holy Spirit.

Not just a religious custom

To confess Jesus as our Lord when being baptised is to testify that he has saved us from our old selves.²⁰ Where water is scarce, it may not be possible to be 'buried' in it, but instead to have a little poured over

the head. The importance lies in the public statement of faith being made by a dedicated follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. In some countries, to confess openly to Christian belief is an offence punishable by death so secret believers need our prayers for courageous wisdom in the choices they make.

Between 1967 and 1990 the atheistic leader of Albania vetoed religious teaching and worship so that those who broke the rules suffered severely for it. Then a freer regime came in and in 1991, on my first Sunday in Albania, eleven young people were publicly baptised in the local lake. All of them told what it had meant to them to learn for the first time about Jesus and his love and to accept him as Saviour and Lord. One had been dumb, but had been wonderfully given a new ability to speak.

Some years later, a young Albanian student heard about this event. She had already learned more about the need to commit herself to the Christ who was now clearly calling her to follow him. On a day to remember she said: ‘Last night I had a dream, at least I think it was a dream.’ Referring to the Lord Jesus, she went on, ‘He came to me and took me to the water. Then he asked me, “Why don’t you give the rest of your life to me?” So can I be baptised now?’ After more teaching about the meaning of this step, she was baptised and has never gone back on her commitment.

For further thought

- Did you know that by accepting Jesus as your Saviour, you also receive his Spirit? Is it news to you that Christian baptism is not a formality but a confession of faith?
- Is this a step you have ever thought about for yourself?

Further resources

- Stott J. *Baptism and fullness: the work of the Holy Spirit*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006.

References

1. Matthew 28:18-20
2. Acts 1:4
3. Romans 7:19-20
4. John 14:25-26, Romans 8:5
5. John 14:3, 16-19
6. Acts 1:10-11
7. John 7:37-39
8. John 4:11-14
9. John 7:5
10. Mark 3:21
11. 1 Corinthians 15:7
12. Acts 15:12-13; 21:17-18
13. Joel 2:28-32
14. Acts 2:40-41
15. Ephesians 1:17-20
16. Romans 8:11-16
17. Philippians 4:13
18. Ephesians 4:22-24
19. Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 2:12
20. Romans 10:9