

The Promise of the Spirit

August 4th, 2013

Ezekiel 36:16-32

"²⁵I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

Beginning today, and continuing for the next five Sundays, we will be taking a break from the Gospel of Luke to spend some time exploring the person and work of the Holy Spirit, whom one author has called "The Forgotten God". But I want you to see this short series not so much as a break, or deviation, from our study of Luke, but a digging deeper into it. So we'll get to Ezekiel 36 shortly, but let's start this morning in Luke 11. What we'll see in these verses in Luke 11 is that as Jesus thinks about great gifts that we might receive, His mind is drawn towards the gift of the Holy Spirit:

"¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ¹¹What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹²or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Now when I hear Jesus talk like that (cf. John 16, that it's better that He go away, so that the Spirit could be sent), that gives me the impression that this is one really precious, wonderful gift! And I'm not sure that we treasure this gift with an intensity of grateful joy that is proportionate to the way Jesus describes this gift. If I polled all of you on the way in and asked you to write down five things for which you are thankful, I wouldn't be surprised if no one mentioned the indwelling Holy Spirit. But what a gift He is!

In the coming weeks we'll return to Luke's Gospel, because from the two volumes that Luke contributed to the New Testament, it seems clear that he has a real concern that we see the Spirit's role in Jesus' ministry, and I think our appetite for, and appreciation of, this gift might be increased as we see the way that the Spirit empowered Jesus for His ministry, and realize that He now offers us this same power that fueled Jesus' ministry.

For today, though, I hope that I can induce you to treasure this great gift in the manner Jesus seems to think we should, and to instill in us a fresh confidence that God is indeed a good Dad, who delights to give you this wonderful gift, and we can be sure of that by looking at what God has already done in history to prove infallibly His commitment to pour this great gift on His people. And we'll do that by looking at the key Old Testament passage that promised the Spirit's coming, a passage that also wonderfully prepares us to receive the Lord's Supper this morning. So turn in your Bibles to Ezekiel 36.

Bad News, then Good News

Before we dive in, it would be helpful for you to know a bit of the context of what's going on in Ezekiel. You're probably familiar with the question, "Which do you want first, the good news or the bad news?" And Ezekiel (like many of the prophetic books in the Bible) is a mixture of both good news and bad news.

In general, the first half of the book calls to attention to the rampant sin, idolatry and wickedness that polluted the nation, and warnings and descriptions of the judgment of God as a result of their sin, which led to the fall of Jerusalem and their exile in Babylon. The people of Israel were filled with great despair, and yet the second half of the book gives them hope, and good news, and blessing, and a promised restoration of the people to their land, and to God. It's all summarized in this passage in chapter 36:

"¹⁶The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁷“Son of man, when the house of Israel lived in their own land, they defiled it by their ways and their deeds. Their ways before me were like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual impurity. ¹⁸So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed in the land, for the idols with which they had defiled it. ¹⁹I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries. In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them.”

God's Highest Aim in Sending the Spirit

So we see that the problem of Israel's consistent, faithless, spiritually adulterous rebellion against God is "solved" by God's judgment upon them, their exile from the Promised Land. And yet we see here that God's solution to the problem of their rebellion poses another problem: *"²⁰But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, ‘These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land.’"*

As God's people are defeated and dispersed among other nations, those nations begin to mock their God. How weak, how powerless, must He be, if this is your fate. Glory to Nebuchadnezzar, glory to the gods of Babylon, who appear to be stronger than the God of Israel. Sin is ultimately evil because it proclaims a lie about God, it treats Him as common and ordinary. And God cannot, and will not, tolerate this:

"²¹But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. ²²“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ²³And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.”

This shows us the purpose of the New Covenant, in an ultimate sense. Yes, the New Covenant (the blessings of which we'll look at shortly) brings great good to God's people. But is it not crystal clear from these

verses (which describe vividly what Jesus is going to accomplish for God's people through His life, death and resurrection) that God's ultimate reason for acting in salvation is to vindicate and honor the glory of His holy name?

You are not the highest passion in God's heart; God is. And that's really good news for you and me, because your soul bears witness to the fact that your greatest thrills are found in the admiration of greatness, and not yours. It's a sick person who would come to the edge of the Grand Canyon and pull out a portable mirror and look at themselves, rather than the glory of the Canyon. You forget about yourself, because you're so caught up in the greatness and glory of something outside of you.

But the Grand Canyon is a yawn compared with the glory and majesty and beauty of the One who spoke the galaxies into existence! So don't begrudge God for being God-centered, and acting for the glory and honor of His own name. In acting for the glory of His own great name, He gives you what is best for you. And that's what the rest of these verses show. The New Covenant, which God ultimately brings about because of the concern He has for His own great name, brings you profound spiritual blessings.

The Blessings of the New Covenant

"²⁴I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. ²⁵I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. ²⁸You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. ²⁹And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses."

Notice these blessings:

1. Restoration of the people to their land
2. Cleansing from the moral filth of sin
3. A heart of stone replaced with a heart of flesh
4. God's own Spirit residing in us
5. Intimate relationship with God

"³¹Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations. ³²It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel."

I don't think this is talking about an attitude of ongoing guilt, shame, self-loathing that we're to feel. God's Word (and the New Covenant) consistently tells us that when we remember and mourn for our sin, we can be assured that God will not (cf. Psalm 103:12). Rather, this is what Jonathan Edwards called "evangelical humiliation", a broken-hearted humility, a poverty of spirit, and sense of unworthiness before God, that marvels at His goodness towards someone in such a miserable plight as we were.

Connection to the "New Covenant"

Now notice in Jeremiah 31 that these same blessings (without explicit mention of the Spirit) are referred to as the New Covenant:

"³¹ 'Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³²not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the

greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.””

Notice the same wonderful blessings are recorded here:

1. Total forgiveness and the removal of our sins
2. The Law of God written on the hearts of His people (by the Spirit, according to Ezekiel), so that God's will is no longer a demand from outside that crushes and condemns, but a desire from within
3. An intimate, internal experience of knowing God personally

This connection (between the giving of the Spirit and the New Covenant, between Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36) is made explicit in 2 Corinthians 3:6, ⁶ “[God] has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

What's new is not the Old Covenant was about obeying commands, and now we don't need to do that because we're under grace. What's new is that now, by the Spirit, God will do for and in us what we have proven so inept at doing ourselves: He will give enablement to walk in accord with His will. In the New Covenant, grace will give what the Law demands. The New Covenant doesn't make God's commands negligible; it makes them doable, because God's own Spirit has been given to us, to empower us to walk in newness of life.

Jesus is the Fulfillment of God's New Covenant Promise

And these wonderful Old Testament promises of pardon and power and intimate communion with God find their fulfillment in Jesus:

²⁰ *And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”*

Jesus is the Mediator of the New Covenant, and by His broken body and shed blood, the blessings of the New Covenant are available to

everyone who feels the shame and wretchedness of their rebellion and unbelief and flees to Jesus for refuge. The blood-shedding of Jesus is the foundation of the blessings of the New Covenant. When Jesus says the new covenant is "in My blood," He means that everything that the New Covenant promised is provided by the blood of Christ:

1. Because of the blood of Christ, our sins are forgiven (as Jeremiah 31:34 promises)
2. Because of the blood of Christ, we are given the Holy Spirit (as Ezekiel 36:36 promises).
3. Because of the blood of Christ, we know God personally.
4. Because of the blood of Christ, the Law is written on our hearts, not on stone tablets.

What more does God need to do to persuade you today that He's a good, loving, gracious, tender, compassionate, patient, forgiving, Father, so committed to your good and holiness that He would willingly deliver up His Son to the agonies of the cross, who suffered the curse of our rebellion, so that blessings of the New Covenant might be poured out on hell-deserving sinners like you and me.

Brothers and sisters, God delights in giving the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him! So ask Him today for it! Even if you have received the gift and are a sharer in the New Covenant through faith in Jesus, you can (and should) ask God to fill you again and again with His Spirit! And as we take the bread and the cup now, we remember the cost that was paid, and the commitment of our gracious and loving God, to give us this wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit.