

Moving Forward with the Spirit

Joel 2:28-29 (Pentecost - May 28/31, 2020)

After this, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams. Your young men will see visions. Even on the male servants and the female servants, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

When you are given a gift, how do you know if it's a good gift or not? Whether you realize it or not, we have a tendency to evaluate the gifts that are given to us based upon certain considerations. Who gave it to you? Was it someone special in your life? Did the person appear to put a lot of thought into that gift? Is it something that you needed or just wanted? Is it practical? Can it be useful for your daily life or is it a fun gift? Ultimately how you view the gift and value it is determined by many of those questions.

Before Jesus visibly left this world, he promised a special gift - the Holy Spirit. We heard Jesus say to his disciples recorded for us in the book of John, **"Nevertheless, I am telling the truth: It is good for you that I go away. For if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you."** (16:7) The Holy Spirit is not some impersonal force. He is true God equal to the Father and the Son. We may not think about him as much as God the Father or God the Son, but that doesn't minimize the importance of what Jesus is promising. Jesus promises what the prophet Joel had prophesied concerning future days, a time that began when the Spirit was given in a special way. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came with spectacular signs. The sound of the wind and the little tongues of fire on their heads announced his promised arrival and got the people's attention.

We may not be seeing little flames of fire over our heads, but the Holy Spirit is still being given throughout these last days until the glorious return of Christ. So on this Pentecost Day, focusing on Joel's prophecy of Pentecost, we dig deeper and ask some questions to evaluate this special gift sent from God to us so that we value the Spirit's presence and coming even more. Moving forward with the Spirit we understand the Holy Spirit's importance to our life as God's people. First we examine just how special this gift is.

As Joel was recording the words of this prophecy hundreds of years before that first Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was already at work among God's people. He was the one working faith in their hearts to believe the promises of God concerning a Savior from sin. Other Old Testament writers also spoke about the Spirit. So what exactly is Joel talking about then? Joel is pointing to a time when God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh, on people in a special, big way. To pour something is to give it in abundance as opposed to sprinkling. If I were to pour you a glass of water, there's a lot of water coming into the cup as opposed to if I just sprinkled water. Joel promises that when God poured out his Spirit, it would be a downpour that extends to people so that they see like prophets.

God did not reveal special messages to all the Israelites. Instead God revealed his message to specially called prophets. Through dreams and visions God made that message known to the people through these prophets revealing himself, his will, and insights into his plan of salvation. It was this very fact which led Moses to pray, **"If only all the Lord's people were prophets so that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!"** (Numbers 11:29) The very thing Moses prayed for, Joel sees happening. Joel sees young and old, men and women, slave and free, receiving revelations like prophets. He sees a time when that fuller richer revelation of God, his will, and his plan of salvation extends not just to called prophets, but to people who would then see like prophets. But how exactly would these people see that revelation?

As an Old Testament prophet, Joel speaks in Old Testament terms. So his words do not mean that God's people should expect God to communicate with them in a supernatural way through dreams and visions. Now in these last days God has chosen to reveal himself, his will, and his now completed plan of salvation working through his Word to pour out his Spirit on people like you and I. The Spirit's outpouring on us is indeed a glorious gift from God to people, but couldn't we make it alright without the Spirit at all? Is the Spirit really a needed gift? Couldn't we come to faith on our own?

Joel says that this outpouring of the Spirit will be on all flesh. Clearly he is talking about people, but it surely wasn't accidental that God inspired his prophet to use "flesh" and not the word for "people". This should tell us something about the people on whom the Holy Spirit would be poured out on.

In the Scriptures, flesh is often used to describe the sinful condition in which all people are born since Adam's fall into sin. What is flesh is without the Spirit. Jesus said to Nicodemus, **"Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh. Whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit."** (John 3:6) Without the Holy Spirit working in the sinful heart there is no spiritual life even though in the flesh they are alive. When we understand our natural spiritual condition is lifeless, helpless, and worthless without the Spirit, we begin to realize that God's glorious gift of the Spirit God promises to pour out on flesh like you and I is a needed gift. It is the Spirit who gives life as a gracious, free gift to undeserving sinners by working faith in hearts to believe salvation in Jesus.

Martin Luther in the Small Catechism explains the necessity of the Spirit in our life, in his explanations of the Creed. He wrote in the form of a confession of faith. "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." God said through the prophet Joel, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh." Moving forward as God's people, his Church, we rejoice at this glorious and needed gift which gives us life seeing God's salvation as prophets, but is the gift of the Holy Spirit practical in everyday life?

When something is practical, it has applications and uses in our everyday life. For example, Father's Day is coming up. If you wanted to give a practical gift, you might consider buying for him a tool of some kind. There's general tools for the home such as drills, hammers, and screwdrivers. There's yard tools like shovels, rakes, lawn mowers, weed eaters, and leaf blowers. There's grilling tools like grills, grill covers, and cooking utensils. All of those probably would be considered "practical".

Obviously there are many ways that the gift of the Spirit is practical every day as we move forward as he keeps strengthening our faith moving us then to live our faith. However let's think about the practical nature of the Holy Spirit in our everyday life living our faith in context of Joel's Pentecost prophecy. It is the Spirit who empowers people to complete the job of a prophet.

The work of a prophet was not done just by receiving the message from God. He was also to prophesy, to speak whatever he was commanded to say to the people. We tend to think of "prophesying" as telling the future like the prophet Joel is doing for us today. However, the fact is that while God's prophets did sometimes speak about future events like Pentecost or the coming Savior, more often they were given messages which affected the present. So when Joel says that God's people will prophesy, he simply means they will tell and teach and preach and proclaim God's Word to the people around them. Joels sees them serving as heralds of the truth. We see this on the Day of Pentecost.

Jesus had given the command before he ascended into heaven that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. However before that command, he said they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. So ten days after his ascension, when the Spirit filled the believers and enabled them to speak in languages they had never learned, the many visitors to Jerusalem from all over the region heard the wonders of God in their own language. Then in the crowd's confusion at what was happening, the Holy Spirit not only gave Peter the words he was to speak, but also empowered him to speak them boldly as a powerful prophet of God's truth. He explained what was happening and proclaimed salvation in Christ. Just as the Holy Spirit was practical for the early church in their lives as God's people empowering them to speak like prophets to those around them, the same is true today.

There may not be little tongues of fire on your head or mine today. Yet the Spirit is still empowering us to speak his message of salvation in Christ boldly like prophets. Through people like you and I, people who are the Church, the outpouring of the Spirit continues on all flesh. How much more practical of a gift could we have been given as the Church carries out its purpose every day.

We have indeed been given a special glorious gift, a needed gift, and a practical gift. It is important in our life as God's people. After opening our hearts to see and hear and believe, the same Spirit empowers us to declare the wonders of God. We may not be speaking in languages that we have never learned before nor always standing in front of a large crowd like Peter, but the prophet Joel all the way back in Old Testament times saw Pentecost happening not just on Pentecost. As the Church moves forward, as we move forward during these last days, we move forward with the Spirit until Christ returns. Amen



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