

When The Spirit Comes

Longing for the Spirit

The Jews of Jesus' day longed for the time when God would do something new among them. They looked back to the days when God had done great things for them in the past. He had rescued them from slavery in Egypt. He had made them his people. He had brought them through the wilderness into the Promised Land. He had given them King David, a man who, though deeply flawed, reflected the shepherd heart of God. David had given them victory over their enemies. He had established Jerusalem as the City of God, the capital of Israel. He had prepared the way for the building of the Temple, the symbol of God's presence among his people and his reign over all the earth. David had ushered in a period of relative peace and prosperity when, under Solomon, each man sat under his own vine and fig tree.

But all of this had been lost, lost through Israel's own disobedience. It had been lost in most dramatic fashion at the time of the exile when, after the division of God's people and destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel, the remaining kingdom of Judah was defeated and many of the Jews were carried off into Babylon. The Jews had never really recovered from this exile. They remained a scattered people, subject to the passing empires of this world.

They remembered the words of Jeremiah who had spoken of the coming exile. They remembered how God had sent him to the potter's house:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

Jeremiah 18:1-6 NIV

What an object lesson this had been for Jeremiah – and for Israel. Clay that is uneven and lumpy is resistant to the moulding hands of the potter and quickly throws itself out of shape. There is no alternative but for the potter to take that clay and crush it and knead it until it is pliable in his hands. Then he is able to mould it into something beautiful and useful for his purposes. Israel had been rebellious in the hands of the great Potter and was now facing a time of crushing, a time of destruction, a time of judgment. But this was not to be the end of the story, for after this time of crushing, the great Potter intended to remould the clay, to make a new covenant (Jer. 31), to create anew a people who would be responsive to him and useful in his service.

The Jews of Jesus' day longed for God to do something new. They longed for him to do again what he had done in the past, but to do it now in an even more dramatic way. They longed for God to establish *his* kingdom in the earth. They longed for God to establish his covenant with them afresh – to make a new covenant. They longed for a work of the Spirit of God that would ensure that this new covenant was not merely an external reordering of things but a radical transformation of the heart of his people. They longed for a new work of the creative Spirit who had brooded over the chaos at the dawn of creation and had brought a world into being. "Do it again God! By your Spirit, let there be a new creation!"

They longed for a new work of the prophetic Spirit through whom so many promises had been proclaimed, prophecies declaring the wonders of what would yet be. They longed for the coming of the Spirit to breathe life into the promises so that they might no longer be mere promises but might become reality. For promise alone leaves an ache in the heart for it underlines what we do not have; it brings a longing for fulfillment, for delivery.

Listen to one of those prophecies of old and let your imagination see and hear the dramatic picture. Ezekiel, called to minister to an exiled people, writes,

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me to and fro among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "O Sovereign Lord, you alone know."

Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.' "

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.' " So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army.

Ezekiel 37:1-10 NIV

This was Israel at the time of the exile – dry bones. This was Israel still when Jesus came on the scene – dry bones, lacking life. Could these bones live? Many Jews in Jesus' day longed for the age of the new covenant, an age to be brought in by the Messiah, an age marked by the life-giving Spirit, breathing life again into these dry bones.

The age they longed for would be marked by new life, abundant life, spilling-over life. It would be more than a renewing of Israel; it would be a fulfilling at last of the promise made to Abraham that in him all nations would be blessed. The age of the Messiah, the dawn of the new covenant, the age of the Spirit, would mean not merely a gathering again of the scattered remnant of Israel but would be marked by a gathering in of the Gentiles. The nations would acknowledge and worship the God of Abraham as the living God, creator of heaven and earth.

This was the longing of many within Israel when Jesus was born. Luke 2 records the baby Jesus being presented at the Temple. There the family encountered a man called Simeon who is described as follows:

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. (Luke 2:25 NIV)

Simeon was looking for the "consolation of Israel." The term *consolation* (paraklesis) is difficult to translate but is from the same root as the word used by Jesus to describe the Holy Spirit in John 16 (see below). This man was looking for God to visit his people again: for God to come in the power of his Spirit and restore his people Israel to all that he had intended them to be; for God to come and be with them and never leave them again. And what does Simeon say when he takes the baby Jesus in his arms?

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32 NIV)

Simeon is saying, "Here it is! All that I have longed for, all that the prophets spoke of, has now arrived!"

Promise of the Spirit

On the evening before his crucifixion, Jesus seeks to prepare his disciples for the fact that he is about to be taken from them. Listen to his words to them in John 16.

“Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.

“In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.”

John 16:5-16

Here Jesus promises his disciples that the Spirit will come – the Counsellor, the Comforter, the Paraklete who will bring paraklesis (consolation) to Israel.

The promise of the Spirit is intimately tied up with the person of Jesus. He is the one who promises the Spirit to his disciples and who will give the Spirit to the disciples. But the Spirit cannot come until Jesus has returned to the Father (verse 7). Why? Why cannot the Spirit yet be given? It is because of what the Spirit will be sent to do. He will bring in the new creation. And the new creation can spring only from Jesus' death and resurrection. This is the way by which Jesus is going to the Father – by way of the cross, by way of the empty tomb.

This is the means by which the Father is going to renew all things. Remember the image of the potter: God is going to crush the old in order to make of it something new. And it is *here* that the great Potter crushes the old Israel in its rebellion and disobedience: At the cross; even by crushing the Messiah. "It was the Lord's will to crush *him*." (Isa. 53:10). *Here* is the place where God brings a rebellious people to judgment. It is the long abandonment of exile that now finds voice in the cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?".

And it is *here*, in the garden tomb, that the lifeless bones of Israel are given life again. "Can these bones live" – these bones of Israel's crucified Messiah? Yes! they can, and must, and do. *Here* is the beginning of God's act of new creation.

And it is only when *this* new creation is exalted to the heavens, only when a *man* reigns over all creation as the last Adam, that the Holy Spirit can be poured out. The last Adam has become a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45), pouring his Spirit upon a dry-bone world that others might share with him and in him the life of the new creation.

This is the Spirit's work, to bring into being the new creation accomplished by Jesus. This he does by constraining men and women to bow the knee to Jesus and

acknowledge him as both Lord and Christ. It is by this work of the Spirit that the kingdom of this world shall become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.

Jesus says that when the Spirit comes, he will make him (Jesus), known. He will convict the world of guilt – show the world that it is in the wrong. And he will do this in regard to sin, righteousness and judgment.

The Spirit will convict the world in regard to sin because people have not believed in Jesus. They put him to death. They fail still to believe in him. The Spirit will show the world it is wrong in this regard as the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Christ Jesus shines into the darkness of unbelief. The Spirit will lead people to faith in Jesus, showing people that he is Saviour of the world and the only hope for the world.

The Spirit will convict the world in regard to righteousness because Jesus has returned to the Father. The Spirit will bring people to see that the rejected Jesus is exalted at God's right hand. He has been vindicated by the Father, declared to be the righteous one. The Spirit will bring people to see that the righteousness of God is displayed in the crucified, risen and exalted Christ and that righteousness is to be found in him and in him alone.

The Spirit will convict the world in regard to judgment because the prince of this world is judged. This present world, its corrupt rule and perverted values have all come under judgment at the cross. This current world, marked by self-serving, self-gratification, the thirst for power and desire to be top-dog is all passing away. There is no future in it. The Spirit will show people that there is a better way, a life that *will* last, and that it is to be found in Jesus and in following him.

When the Spirit comes, says Jesus, he will make all of these things plain to the world. But for now, not even the disciples are able to grasp these things (Jn 16:12-12). But when the Spirit comes, "He will [then] tell you what is yet to come." (v.13). He will show you the future. He will show you what God plans to do. He will show you the Promised Land, and he will lead you into it.

Coming of the Spirit

On the first day of Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection, his disciples were waiting, waiting for the promised Holy Spirit, waiting perhaps still rather confused and afraid. But when the Spirit came, they were *transformed*.

They had a new understanding of what God had done in Jesus. Suddenly it all fitted together – it all made sense. Now they saw how all the scriptures fitted together with Jesus at the centre of it all. "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel", say Peter and preaches to the crowds about Jesus, the Christ.

It was not that Peter and the other disciples had suddenly learnt some new doctrines, rather it was that now, all that Jesus had taught them had become a living reality and that they themselves were caught up in it. They were full of the Spirit. They were full of Jesus – his life in their lives. They were living *now* the life of the new creation, the life of the age to come.

When the Spirit came, these first disciples found a new way of living and found the power to live it. They lived a life marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control: Love that reflected the love of God in Jesus, love even for a lost and perverse world; joy unspeakable in the knowledge of sin forgiven and the freedom of being children of the living God; peace with God ...

They had entered into a new way of living marked by grace – transforming grace that streamed to them from God in Christ. They lived a life shaped by that grace and

marked by giving and forgiving: giving themselves to others without expectation of return; forgiving freely and continually the hurts and wrongs done to them by others.

These were a people taken up by Jesus Christ: living life as it was meant to be lived; God's restoration project begun. For in the Spirit they encountered God as the one who restores the soul. They lived, albeit imperfectly – sometimes very imperfectly – the life of the age to come. And they declared to the world, "God is making all things new. He has done it in Jesus. He is doing it in us by the power of his Spirit. Come and join us. Live as you were always meant to live by following Jesus in the power of the Spirit."

Jesus left behind 120 believers when he ascended into heaven. Yet in the space of 300 years Christianity swept across the Roman Empire and became the dominant faith of the empire. In 300 years! How did that happen? Rob Bell, in his curiously named book *Velvet Elvis* writes of the church of those first centuries like this:

To be part of the church was to join a countercultural society that was partnering with God to create a new kind of culture, right under the nose of the caesars. These Christians made sure everybody in their midst had enough to eat. They made sure everybody was able to pay their bills. They made sure there was enough to go around. The resurrection for them was not an abstract spiritual concept; it was a concrete social and economic reality. God raised Jesus from the dead to show the world that Jesus is Lord, and it is through his power and his example and his Spirit that the world is restored...

... They saw it as their responsibility to put Jesus' message on display. To the outside world, it was less about proving and more about inviting people to experience this community of Jesus' followers for themselves.

And so these Christians passed on their faith to the next generation who passed it on to the next generation who passed it on to the next generation until it got to ... us. Here. Today. Those who follow Jesus and belong to his church. And now it is our turn. It is our turn to step up and take responsibility for who the church is going to be for the next generation. It is our turn to redefine and reshape and dream it all up again. It is our turn to rediscover the beautiful, dangerous, compelling idea that a group of people, surrendered to God and to each other, really can change the world.

Bob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2005 pp.163,164

When the Spirit comes, he restores the soul. He remoulds the misshapen clay to fashion it anew. He creates a people remade in the image of God – made like Christ. He creates a people possessed by God; dominated by Jesus Christ; transformed by the Spirit; changing the world.

When the Spirit comes, he will show you what is yet to come. He is the giver of dreams and visions. The world may sing, "Any dream will do" and encourage people to follow their own dreams. But the people who know God know that no other dream will do. We have seen the Promised Land. We have seen what God intends for his creation. We have *seen* the kingdom of God, and nothing else will ever do. No other dream will do for us. No other dream will do for this sad and needy world.

And the only question that remains is this: Are you on board? Have *you* seen God's purpose for his creation in Jesus the Christ? Have *you* been captivated by the dream – not just to talk about it, but to live it, following Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit? "Be the change you wish to see."

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