

Our Greatest Need, Part 3

Sermon by: Pastor John Anderson

Clairemont Seventh-day Adventist Church May 25, 2013

A few weeks ago we began a study on the topic of "Our Greatest Need," which is the reception of the Holy Spirit. Remember the dream that Ellen White had in which an angel stood at the gate of the golden city, the New Jerusalem. Only one question was asked of those who wanted entrance. It was, "Have you received the Holy Spirit?" The reception of the Holy Spirit is indispensable to our being born again, and so that we can grow in Him.

"Oh, but pastor," someone says, "I've been a church member for years. Surely you don't suggest that I need to be re-born, do you?" Allow me to ask a question. To whom did Jesus give the invitation, "You must be born again"? Was it some Gentile who happened to have wandered into Judea from Gaza? Was it someone who had never gone to church on Sabbath, never paid tithe and was ignorant of the Scriptures? No! Who was it to whom Jesus spoke those words? It was Nicodemus, a highly respected instructor in Israel. In fact, Jesus didn't say to him, "You are a teacher in Israel and don't know these things." He said "You are *the* teacher in Israel." Yes, Nicodemus, the beloved teacher, needed to be re-born. He needed to receive the Holy Spirit.

"But how does someone receive the Holy Spirit?" someone asks. "Do you have to go through some elaborate ritual? Is it some complicated formula that you have to follow?" Let's look at two Bible passages that tell us how the Holy Spirit is received as we begin our study today. We'll look at two passages that say virtually the same thing, but have a slight difference; a very important difference. Open your Bible to the familiar passage in Matthew 7 which reads, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" Matthew 7:7-11.

"That's a wonderful passage," you say, "but what does it have to do with receiving the Holy Spirit?" Here's the beauty of having not one, but 4 accounts of Jesus' life. Look at how Luke reports this same conversation. We're reading now from Luke 11, beginning in verse 9. You will see that the narrative is similar to what we just read in Matthew 7. He invites us to ask, to seek and to knock. Verse 11 is also very similar, speaking of how earthly fathers give good gifts to their children. But notice very carefully verse 13. It adds a dimension that is not included in Matthew's book. Comparing the two passages will reveal a valuable insight. In the book of Matthew we read, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven

give *good things* to those who ask Him!"

In Luke we read, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the *Holy Spirit* to those who ask Him." Luke 11:9-13. When you think about it, this makes perfect sense. The Holy Spirit is God's greatest gift. The Gift of the Holy Spirit is the Gift that includes all others. And how is this wonderful Gift received? It is by asking, seeking and knocking. Here's an important point, though. The force of those verbs in the original is "*keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking.*" It is the *persevering prayer* that is ultimately answered.

Did not Elijah pray *7 times* before the cloud that promised showers was seen? What if he had given up after the 6th prayer! "Well, I prayed for the rain; I prayed 6 times, and God didn't answer my prayer. I guess He doesn't listen." And doesn't the Bible compare the giving of the Holy Spirit to the falling of rain, the "early" and the "latter" rain? Elijah's story, as he prayed 7 times for the refreshing cloud that brought the showers, is an illustration of what Jesus said in Luke 11. Elijah "kept on asking." We must keep on asking, seeking and knocking. And God will give the Holy Spirit, the greatest Gift.

Did not Naaman dip *7 times* before his skin was healed from the leprosy? Isn't that an illustration of the new birth, brought by the Holy Spirit? What if he stopped after the 6th time? "I guess what the prophet said didn't work. I kind of doubted it would. I have better rivers back home, anyway, than this muddy Jordan." He would still have had his leprosy, wouldn't he. But he "kept on" dipping, and healing came.

Did not Jesus encourage us to continue to pray in Luke 18:1, and illustrated His point with the story of the widow who repeatedly appealed to the judge who seemed to be indifferent? All of these stories and illustrations bear out the principle that we need to "keep on" asking, seeking and knocking, but that God *will* answer the sincere and fervent prayer and send the Holy Spirit into our lives.

The reception of the Holy Spirit is our greatest need, more than physical food, more than shelter or transportation. Why? Because when Jesus returns He is looking for the people who reflect His likeness, His character. Though Adam was made in the image of God, that likeness was marred when sin entered. But God's objective still stands: "Let Us make man in Our image." We were born in sin, but God still loves us, and His objective toward us is no different. If we ask; if we "keep on asking," He will send the Holy Spirit through Whom our characters can be changed into the divine likeness and make us ready to live with holy angels.

In August of 1987 Joy White brought her daughter Carlina, who was suffering from a fever, into a Harlem hospital. On the 4th of August, the little girl

was kidnapped from that hospital by Ann Pettway, who gave her the name Nejdra Nance and raised her in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Twenty-three years later, and now a mother herself, Carlina began to suspect that Ann was not her real mom. She did some investigation on-line and contacted an agency that searches for missing children. Doing a little detective work, they thought she might be the little girl who had been kidnapped over two decades before from the Harlem hospital.

A meeting was arranged between Carlina and Joy and DNA tests were taken, but they really weren't needed. Said her grandmother Elizabeth, "In my heart, when I saw her, I knew it was her because she looks just like Joy and she has her father's eyes." Oh friends! Like little Carlina, the human family was "kidnapped" by the devil and separated from our heavenly Father. But a wondrous plan of redemption was put in place to restore what was lost. When He comes back, Jesus will know His children because they will be like Him in character. "When He is revealed, we shall be like Him." I John 3:2. Jesus is coming soon, coming to take His children home! There will be a reunion greater than when Carlina was restored to her mother Joy. Oh that when He comes He will see His likeness in us. Oh that today that transformation would take place so that others would see Jesus in us! We must pray and "keep on praying" to receive the Holy Spirit so that this can be our experience.

Let's take a quick review of what we studied before. We saw that the presence of the Holy Spirit is prominent in the Old Testament, from the very beginning. This may come as a surprise to some, who think that the Holy Spirit had no role on this earth until the Day of Pentecost, but the Bible shows clearly that He was active at Creation, as reported in Genesis 1. We saw that the teaching of the Godhead is explicit in Genesis 1:2, which reports that the Spirit was "hovering" over the globe in its condition of being "without form and void" and in "darkness." We saw that the teaching of the Godhead is *implicit* in the usage of the name "Elohim," the name for God in Genesis 1:1, which is in the plural form, meaning "three or more," according to the rules of Hebrew grammar. Later in Genesis 1 we found plural pronouns used when God said, "Let Us make man in Our image."

In chapter 3 of Genesis we saw that the Holy Spirit is the "enmity," the Voice of conscience that was put in place to restrict the activities and influence of Satan, who thought that he had gained unlimited control of the world and of the human family when Adam and Eve fell. "No," the Lord said to him, "I will put enmity between you and the woman." Without this mankind would have fallen totally under the control of Satan and the story of Planet Earth would have been even sadder than it is. However, at the end of time, God's Spirit will be withdrawn from those who persistently resist His influence, throwing this planet into the chaos of the "time of trouble such as never was" coupled with the outpouring of the seven last plagues of Revelation 16. God will then allow the universe to see what life on this planet under Satan's control would have been like all along, had

He not put a check on Satan's influence.

The Holy Spirit was active at Creation, the Flood, the Exodus and after the children of Israel entered Canaan. Today we're going to see the role of the Holy Spirit in Old Testament times in two specific ways; in His giving deliverance from the enemy, and in His giving the prophets the messages of God. These two aspects of the Spirit's work have direct application to our lives today. We battle against the forces of evil and need the Spirit's strength to defeat the devil. We walk in a world that is darkened by sin and need the illumination that the Spirit's messages can give.

Notice the stories that illustrate how it was the Spirit that gave God's people the victory over their enemies in Old Testament times. During the period known as the time of the Judges, we often read that God's Spirit came upon those whom He called to bring dramatic deliverances. Let's take a quick look at a few examples. How was it that Gideon with his meager band of 300 won the battle against 135,000 Midianites? We read that the "Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon" and he won a decisive victory against the enemies of God. Judges 6:34. Later we read that, "The Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah" and he brought about a miraculous deliverance from the forces of Ammon. Judges 11:29.

We read that, "The Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon" Samson and he tore a young lion that threatened him. Judges 14:6. Who in the Bible is the "roaring lion" that seeks to destroy us? It is Satan. Samson's victory over the lion is an illustration of our victory over the devil. How was it accomplished? With a sharp knife? With a deadly spear? With a lethal sword? No, we're told that he had "nothing in his hand." Judges 14:6. It was by the strength given him through the Holy Spirit.

"Oh," someone says, "I thought it was his long hair that gave him his strength." No, the long hair was only a token of his Nazarite vow and his connection with God, Who empowered him with His Spirit. Look carefully at one of the saddest verses in the Bible. After his hair was cut it says that Samson "awoke from his sleep, and said, 'I will go out as before, at other time, and shake myself free!' But he did not know that (his long hair had been cut? No!) the LORD had departed from him." Judges 16:20. The presence of the Lord by His Spirit was Samson's secret of victory.

At his wedding, when his own bride revealed the answer to the riddle he posed, "The Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily" and he struck 30 men of Ashkelon. Judges 14:19. When his own people tied him with ropes and handed him over to the Philistines, "The Spirit of the LORD came mightily on him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that is burned with fire, and his bonds broke loose from his hands," and with a donkey's jawbone he slew a thousand of the Lord's enemies. Judges 15:14.

All of these episodes in the book of Judges and later Old Testament accounts teach us that God's Spirit is the Agency by which victory in the spiritual realm is achieved. How is it that the promise, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you" can be fulfilled in our lives? It is when the Holy Spirit grants us the strength to say "no" to the devil's temptations. "When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD will lift up a standard against him." Isaiah 59:19. Without His indwelling power, we are helpless to resist the devil's wiles.

Let's continue looking at the presence of the Holy Spirit in Old Testament times. Though Saul later rejected the Lord, it was the "Spirit of the LORD" that came upon Israel's first king when he was humble of mind. The story of Saul contains valuable lessons about our receiving the Holy Spirit. It teaches us that someone can have a wonderful beginning in their walk with the Lord, but if the connection is not maintained, sin will eventually take over and lead to disaster. Look at these indications that show how Saul was blessed in the beginning of his reign. The Bible tells us that Saul was "anointed" (I Samuel 10:1), that the Spirit of the Lord came upon him and he prophesied and was "turned into another man," that God was with him, and that "God gave him another heart." I Samuel 10:6, 7, 9. All of these things tell us that Saul was "converted" through the Holy Spirit. He was, in New Testament language, "born again," but because he didn't "keep on" asking, seeking and knocking, it didn't prove to be effective in the long run.

Did King David know about the role of the Holy Spirit in his life? Oh yes. He knew the truth of God's Spirit. Though he stumbled in sin, he sought forgiveness from the Lord, being prompted by His gracious Spirit. After the Bathsheba incident, he prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with Your generous Spirit." Psalm 51:10-12.

David knew that it is the Holy Spirit Who gives the gift of repentance. All of our spiritual blessings come from God. We do not generate them on our own. Without the Spirit's influence, we would have no appetite, no desire for godly things. None. Conviction concerning sin is a gift of God through the quiet voice of the Holy Spirit.

Repentance (that is, being truly sorry for sin; not just that things didn't turn out the way we wanted, but actually being sorry for the sin itself), is a gift of God. To "repent" means to "change your mind." It implies a new way of thinking, which is brought about through the influence of God's Spirit. Later the Apostle Paul wrote, it is the "goodness of God (that) leads to repentance." Romans 2:4.

So the Old Testament makes it very clear that the Spirit gives us victory over sin. It also makes it clear that it is through the Spirit that God's messages are conveyed. Go back for a moment to the story of the creation of Adam,

recorded in Genesis 2. We'll see how it illustrates how God formed the Holy Bible. How was it that Adam came to life? It was when God knelt and breathed into his nostrils the breath or "Spirit" of life that man became a living soul. This verse describes something literal, that is, the physical creation of the body Adam, but it also illustrates the creation of God's Word, the Scriptures.

Thus the content of the Holy Bible, through the process of "inspiration" (which means "breathed into") is not merely words written by man. Yes, it's paper and ink, but it's much more than that. Under the Lord's guidance, this Book became the living oracles of God, the Scriptures that Paul called "God-breathed." Let's note some Old Testament passages that highlight this process.

The gift of the Spirit was manifested throughout the Bible story, including the Old Testament period, in the giving of the Holy Scriptures, the utterances and writings of God's prophets. When the curtain fell after sin entered, and face to face communication between God and man came to an end, the Lord did not leave mankind in a position of ignorance regarding His will and His ways. Prophets were selected, from among men and women, who relayed God's messages to His people. We use the word "inspiration" to describe the process by which these messengers received their information. You can see the word "spirit" in the word "inspiration." These messages were "God-breathed," and in fact that is the word Paul used when referring to this process. He said "All scripture is *theopneustos*," or "God-breathed;" "theo" meaning "God," and "pneustos" coming from the root for "breath," "wind," or "spirit." II Timothy 3:16.

Peter tells us exactly how this happened, and remember, he's speaking of the prophets of *Old Testament* times. "Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating (that's how the prophets received their messages) when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven -things which angels desire to look into." I Peter 1:10-12.

The creation of Adam illustrates the giving of the Scriptures. When God created man, He formed him from the physical elements, the "dust of the ground," and then He breathed into his nostrils the "breath of life," and Adam became a "living being." Genesis 2:7. There was an "earthly" component as well as a "divine" one. This is a model, an illustration of the process by which the Scriptures came to be. There is an "earthly" element, the human penman, the paper and ink, but there is much more than that. Because of this, the Bible isn't like any other book. It has God's Spirit in it. The form of Adam, complete with its physical parts, would have remained lifeless on the Eden carpet unless God did something special and breathed life into him by His Spirit.

The result was a "living being." The result of the combination of the human penman and God's Spirit is a living Book, the Holy Bible. In fact, we read, "For the *Word of God is living* and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." Hebrews 4:12. If you have a King James Bible, you will find that it reads that the Word of God is "quick" and powerful, the word "quick" in this instance not meaning "swift," but "alive," as in the phrase, "the quick and the dead," or when you cut your fingernail "to the quick."

The Holy Spirit conveyed God's messages to the prophets, sometimes in visions or dreams. At times it seemed that the prophet was "carried" to some distant place, as was Daniel when he received the vision recorded in Daniel 8, or John as he was transported to see the holy city, the New Jerusalem coming down. It was in this sense that Peter wrote, "Prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved (or "carried;" that's a literal translation of the Greek word used here) by the Holy Spirit." II Peter 1:21. Of what "holy men" was Peter speaking? They were the prophets who lived in Old Testament times.

What does this mean for us? The Spirit was there when the messages to the prophets was given, and we need the Spirit when we open the pages of the Bible to make sure we're getting the message correctly. Without God's Spirit present when we open the Bible, the devil is ready to put his slant on the words and change the meaning.

Next time we're going to look at the Spirit's role in the life of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Our greatest need is to be filled with the Spirit; to be changed from within, to be recreated in His image. The Spirit today is "hovering," "fluttering" over your heart seeking entrance. He is leading us to righteousness through conviction, repentance and faith. He is there to empower us against the enemy. All we need to do is ask, to "keep on asking," and be willing to open our hearts to Him. Will you receive Him today? Will you covenant to spend time each day in His sacred writings, the "God-breathed" scriptures which will lead you to a friendship with Jesus?