

THE HOLY SPIRIT Chapter 11 The Spirit Quickening

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Transcript

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Chapter 11

The Spirit Quickening

We shall now confine ourselves to the initial operation of the Spirit within the elect of God. Different writers have employed the term "regeneration" with varying latitude: some restricting it unto a single act, others including the whole process by which one becomes a conscious child of God. This has hindered close accuracy of thought, and has introduced considerable confusion through the confounding of things which, though intimately related, are quite distinct. Not only has confusion of thought resulted from a loose use of terms, but serious divisions among professing saints have issued therefrom. We believe that much, if not all, of this would have been avoided had theologians discriminated more sharply and clearly between the principle of grace (spiritual life) which the Spirit first imparts unto the soul, and His consequent stirrings of that principle into exercise. Quickening is the Initial Operation of the Spirit. In earlier years we did not ourselves perceive the distinction which is pointed by John 6:63 and 1 Peter 1:23: the former referring unto the initial act of the Spirit in "quickenning" the spiritually-dead soul, the latter having in view the consequent "birth" of the same. While it is freely allowed that the origin of the "new creature" is shrouded in impenetrable mystery, yet of this we may be certain, that life precedes birth. There is a strict analogy between the natural birth and the spiritual: necessarily so, for God is the Author of them both, and He ordained that the former should adumbrate the latter. Birth is neither the cause nor the beginning of life itself: rather is it the manifestation of a life already existent: there had been a Divine "quickenning" before the child could issue from the womb. In like manner, the Holy Spirit "quickenns" the soul, or imparts spiritual life to it, before its possessor is "brought forth" (as James 1:18 is rightly rendered in the R.V.) and "born again" by the Word of God (1 Pet. 1:23). James 1:18, 1 Peter 1:23, and parallel passages, refer not to the original communication of spiritual life to the soul, but rather to our being enabled to act from that life and induced to love and obey God by means of the Word of Truth—which presupposes a principle of grace already planted in the heart. In His work of illumination, conviction, conversion, and sanctification, the Spirit uses the Word as the means thereto, but in His initial work of "quickenning" He employs no means, operating immediately or directly upon the soul. First there is a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10), and then the "new creature" is stirred into exercise. Faith and all other graces are wrought in us by the Spirit through the instrumentality of the Word, but not so with the principle of life and grace from which

these graces proceed. Quickening Imparts Life In His work of "quickening," by which we mean the impartation of spiritual life to the soul, the Spirit acts immediately from within, and not by applying something from without. Quickening is a direct operation of the Spirit without the use of any instrument: the Word is used by Him afterwards to call into exercise the life then communicated. "Regeneration is a direct operation of the Holy Spirit upon the human spirit. It is the action of Spirit upon spirit, of a Divine Person upon a human person, whereby spiritual life is imparted. Nothing, therefore, of the nature of means or instruments can come between the Holy Spirit and the soul that is made alive. God did not employ an instrument or means when He infused physical life into the body of Adam. There were only two factors: the dust of the ground and the creative power of God which vivified that dust. The Divine omnipotence and dead matter were brought into direct contact, with nothing interposing. The dust was not a means or instrument by which God originated life. So in regeneration there are only two factors: the human soul destitute of spiritual life, and the Holy Spirit who quickens it. "The Word and Truth of God, the most important of all the means of grace, is not a means of regeneration, as distinct from conviction, conversion and sanctification. This is evident when we remember that it is the office of a means or instrument to excite or stimulate an already existing principle of life. Physical food is a means of physical growth, but it supposes physical vitality. If the body is dead, bread cannot be a means or instrument. Intellectual truth is a means of intellectual growth, but it supposes intellectual vitality. If the mind be idiotic, secular knowledge cannot be a means or instrument. Spiritual truth is a means of spiritual growth, in case there be spiritual vitality. But if the mind be dead to righteousness, spiritual truth cannot be a means or instrument. "The unenlightened understanding is unable to apprehend, and the unregenerate will is unable to believe. Vital force is lacking in these two principal factors. What is needed at this point is life and force itself. Consequently, the Author of spiritual life Himself must operate directly, without the use of means or instruments; and outright give spiritual life and power from the dead: that is, ex nihilo. The new life is not imparted because man perceives the truth, but he perceives the truth because the new life is imparted. A man is not regenerated because he has first believed in Christ, but he believes in Christ because he has been regenerated" (W. T. Shedd, Presbyterian, 1889). First the Work of the Spirit, Then the Word Under the guise of honoring the written word, many have (no doubt unwittingly) dishonored the Holy Spirit. The idea which seems to prevail in "orthodox" circles today is that all which is needed for the salvation of souls is to give out the Word in its purity, God being pledged to bless the same. How often we have heard it said, "The Word will do its own work." Many suppose that the Scriptures are quite sufficient of themselves to communicate light to those in darkness and life to those who are dead in sins. But the record which we have of Christ's life ought at once to correct such a view. Who preached the Word as faithfully as He, yet how very few were saved during His three and a half years' ministry?! The parable of the Sower exposes the fallacy of the theory now so widely prevailing. The "seed" sown is the Word. It was scattered upon various kinds of ground, yet notwithstanding the purity and vitality of the seed, where the soil was unfavorable, no increase issued therefrom. Until the ground was made good, the seed yielded no increase. That seed might be watered by copious showers and warmed by a genial sun, but while the soil was bad there could be no harvest. The ground must be changed before it could be fertile. Nor is it the seed which changes the soil: what farmer would ever think of saying, The seed will change the soil! Make no mistake upon this point: the Holy Spirit must first quicken the dead soul into newness of life before the Word obtains any entrance. To say that life is communicated to the soul by the Spirit's application of the Word, and then to affirm that it is the principle of life which gives efficacy to the Word, is but to reason in a circle. The Word cannot profit any soul spiritually until it be "mixed with faith" (Heb. 4:2), and faith cannot be put forth unless it proceeds from a principle of life and grace; and therefore that principle of life is not produced by it. "We might as well suppose that the presenting of a picture to a man who is blind can

enable him to see, as we can suppose that the presenting of the Word in an objective way is the instrument whereby God produces the internal principle by which we are enabled to embrace it" (Thomas Ridgley, Presbyterian, 1730—quoted by us to show we are not here inculcating some new doctrine.) Yet notwithstanding what has been pointed out above, many are still likely to insist upon the quickening power which inheres in the Word itself, reminding us that its voice is that of the Almighty. This we freely and fully acknowledge, but do not all the unregenerate resist, and refuse to heed that Voice? How, then, is that opposition to be removed? Take an illustration. Suppose the window of my room is darkened by an iron wall before it. The sun's beams beat upon it, but still the wall remains. Were it of ice, it would melt away, but the nature of iron is to harden and not soften under the influence of heat. How, then, is the sun to enter my room? Only by removing that wall: a direct power must be put forth for its destruction. In like manner, the deadly enmity of the sinner must be removed by the immediate operation of the Spirit, communicating life, before the Word enters and affects him. "The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness" (Matthew 7:22, 23). By the "eye" is not here meant the mind only, but the disposition of the heart (cf. Mark 7:22). Here Christ tells us in what man's blindness consists, namely, the evil disposition of his heart, and that the only way to remove the darkness, and let in the light, is to change the heart. An "evil eye" is not cured or its darkness removed merely by casting light upon it, any more than the rays of the sun communicate sight unto one whose visive faculty is dead. The eye must be cured, made "single," and then it is capable of receiving the light. "It is said the Lord opened the heart of Lydia, that she attended unto the things that were spoken by Paul (Acts 16:14). It would be a contradiction, and very absurd, to say that God's Word spoken by Paul was that by which her heart was opened; for she knew not what he did speak, until her heart was opened to attend to his words and understand them. Her heart was first opened in order for his words to have any effect or give any light to her. And this must be done by an immediate operation of the Spirit of God on her heart. This was the regeneration now under consideration, by which her heart was renewed, and formed unto true discerning like the single eye" (Samuel Hopkins, 1792). The soul, then, is quickened into newness of life by the direct and supernatural operation of the Spirit, without any medium or means whatever. It is not accomplished by the light of the Word, for it is His very imparting of life which fits the heart to receive the light. This initial work of the Spirit is absolutely indispensable in order to have spiritual illumination. It is depravity or corruption of heart which holds the mind in darkness, and it is in this that unregeneracy consists. It is just as absurd to speak of illumination being conveyed by the Word in order to have a change of heart, or the giving of a relish for spiritual things, as it would be to speak of giving the capacity to a man to taste the sweetness of honey while he was devoid of a palate. No, men are not "quickened" by the Word, they must be quickened in order to receive and understand the Word. "And I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God" (Jer. 24:7): that statement would be quite meaningless if a saving knowledge of or experimental acquaintance with God were obtained through the Word previous to the "new heart" or spiritual life being given, and was the means of our being quickened. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7); the "fear of the Lord" or Divine grace communicated to the heart (spiritual life imparted) alone lays the foundation for spiritual knowledge and activities. Characteristics of Quickening "For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth, even so the Son quickeneth whom He will" (John 5:21); "It is the Spirit that quickeneth: the flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:63). All the Divine operations in the economy of salvation proceed from the Father, are through the Son, and are executed by the Spirit. Quickening is His initial work in the elect. It is that supernatural act by which He brings them out of the grave of spiritual death on to resurrection ground. By it He imparts a principle of grace and habit of holiness; it is the communication of the life of God to the soul. It is an act of creation (2 Cor. 5:17). It is a

Divine "workmanship" (Eph. 2:10). All of these terms denote an act of Omnipotency. The origination of life is utterly impossible to the creature. He can receive life; he can nourish life; he can use and exert it; but he cannot create life. In this work the Spirit acts as sovereign. "The wind bloweth where it listeth (or "pleaseth") ... so is everyone that is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). This does not mean that He acts capriciously, or without reason and motive, but that He is above any obligation to the creature, and is quite uninfluenced by us in what He does. The Spirit might justly have left everyone of us in the hardness of our hearts to perish forever. In quickening one and not another, in bringing a few from death unto life and leaving the mass still dead in trespasses and sins, the Spirit has mercy "on whom He will have mercy." He is absolutely free to work in whom He pleases, for none of the fallen sons of Adam have the slightest claim upon Him. The quickening of the spiritually dead into newness of life is therefore an act of amazing grace: it is an unsought and unmerited favor. The sinner, who is the chosen subject of this Divine operation and object of this inestimable blessing, is infinitely ill-deserving in himself, being thoroughly disposed to go on in wickedness till this change is wrought in him. He is rebellious, and will not hearken to the Divine command; he is obstinate and refuses to repent and embrace the Gospel. However terrified he may be with the fears of threatened doom, however earnest may be his desire to escape misery and be happy forever, no matter how many prayers he may make and things he may do, he has not the least inclination to repent and submit to God. His heart is defiant, full of enmity against God, and daily does he add iniquity unto iniquity. For the Spirit to give a new heart unto such an one is indeed an act of amazing and sovereign grace. This quickening by the Spirit is instantaneous: it is a Divine act, and not a process; it is wrought at once, and not gradually. In a moment of time the soul passes from death unto life. The soul which before was dead toward God, is now alive to Him. The soul which was completely under the domination of sin, is now set free; though the sinful nature itself is not removed nor rendered inoperative, yet the heart is no longer en rapport (in sympathy) with it. The Spirit of God finds the heart wholly corrupt and desperately wicked, but by a miracle of grace He changes its bent, and this by implanting within it the imperishable seed of holiness. There is no medium between a carnal and a spiritual state: the one is what we were by nature, the other is what we become by grace, by the instantaneous and invincible operation of the Almighty Spirit. This initial work of quickening is entirely unperceived by us, for it lies outside the realm and the range of human consciousness. Those who are dead possess no perception, and though the work of bringing them on to resurrection ground is indeed a great and powerful one, in the very nature of the case its subjects can know nothing whatever about it until after it has been accomplished. When Adam was created, he was conscious of nothing but that he now existed and was free to act: the Divine operation which was the cause of his existence was over and finished before he began to be conscious of anything. This initial operation of the Spirit by which the elect become new creatures can only be known by its effects and consequences. "The wind bloweth where it listeth," that is first; then "thou hearest the sound thereof" (John 3:8): it is now made known, in a variety of ways, to the conscience and understanding. Under this work of quickening we are entirely passive, by which is meant that there is no co-operation whatever between the will of the sinner and the act of the Holy Spirit. As we have said, this initial work of the Spirit is effected by free and sovereign grace, consisting of the infusion of a principle of spiritual life into the soul, by which all its faculties are supernaturally renovated. This being the case, the sinner must be entirely passive, like clay in the hands of a potter, for until Divine grace is exerted upon him he is utterly incapable of any spiritual acts, being dead in trespasses and sins. Lazarus co-operated not in his resurrection: he knew not that the Savior had come to his sepulcher to deliver him from death. Such is the case with each of God's elect when the Spirit commences to deal with them. They must first be quickened into newness of life before they can have the slightest desire or motion of the will toward spiritual things; hence, for them to contribute the smallest iota unto their quickening is utterly impossible. The life which the

Spirit imparts when He quickens is uniform in all its favored subjects. "As seed virtually contains in it all that afterwards proceeds from it, the blade, stalk, ear, and full corn in the ear, so the first principle of grace implanted in the heart seminally contains all the grace which afterwards appears in all the fruits, effects, acts, and exercises of it" (John Gill). Each quickened person experiences the same radical change, by which the image of God is stamped upon the soul: "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6), never anything less, and never anything more. Each quickened person is made a new creature in Christ, and possesses all the constituent parts of "the new man." Later, some may be more lively and vigorous, as God gives stronger faith unto one than to another; yet there is no difference in their original: all partake of the same life. While there is great variety in our perception and understanding of the work of the Spirit within us, there is no difference in the initial work itself. While there is much difference in the carrying on of this work unto perfection in the growth of the "new creature"—some making speedy progress, others thriving slowly and bringing forth little fruit—yet the new creation itself is the same in all. Each alike enters the kingdom of God, becomes a vital member of Christ's mystical body, is given a place in the living family of God. Later, one may appear more beautiful than another, by having the image of his heavenly Father more evidently imprinted upon him, yet not more truly so. There are degrees in sanctification, but none in vivification. There has never been but one kind of spiritual quickening in this world, being in its essential nature specifically the same in all. Only the Beginning Let it be pointed out in conclusion that the Spirit's quickening is only the beginning of God's work of grace in the soul. This does not wholly renew the heart at once: no indeed, the inner man needs to be "renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16). But from that small beginning, the work continues— God watering it "every moment" (Isa. 27:3)—and goes on to perfection; that is, till the heart is made perfectly clean and holy, which is not accomplished till death. God continues to work in His elect, "both to will and to do of His good pleasure," they being as completely dependent upon the Spirit's influence for every right exercise of the will after, as for the first. "Being confident of this very thing, that He which bath begun a good work within you will finish it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

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