

THE HOLY SPIRIT Chapter 14 The Spirit Comforting

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Transcript

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Chapter 14

The Spirit Comforting

Several Sequential Steps The saving work of the Spirit in the heart of God's elect is a gradual and progressive one, conducting the soul step by step in the due method and order of the Gospel to Christ. Where there is no self-condemnation and humiliation there can be no saving faith in the Lord Jesus: "Ye repented not afterward, that ye might believe Him" (Matthew 21:32) was His own express affirmation. It is the burdensome sense of sin which prepares the soul for the Savior: "Come unto Me all ye that labors and are heavy laden" (Matthew 11:28). Without conviction there can be no contrition and compunction: he that sees not his wickedness and guilt never mourns for it; he that feels not his filthiness and wretchedness never bewails it. Never was there one tear of true repentance seen to drop from the eye of an unconvicted sinner. Equally true is it that without illumination there can be no conviction, for what is conviction but the application to the heart and conscience of the light which the Spirit has communicated to the mind and understanding: Acts 2:37. So, likewise, there can be no effectual illumination until there has been a Divine quickening, for a dead soul can neither see nor feel in a spiritual manner. In this order, then, the Spirit draws souls to Christ: He brings them from death unto life, shines into their minds, applies the light to their consciences by effectual conviction, wounds and breaks their hearts for sin in compunction, and then moves the will to embrace Christ in the way of faith for salvation. These several steps are more distinctly discerned in some Christians than in others. They are more clearly to be traced in the adult convert, than in those who are brought to Christ in their youth. So, too, they are more easily perceived in such as are drawn to Him out of a state of profaneness than those who had the advantages of a pious education. Yet in them, too, after conversion, the exercises of their hearts—following a period of declension and backsliding—correspond thereto. But in this order the work of the Spirit is carried on, ordinarily, in all—however it may differ in point of clearness in the one and in the other. God is a God of order both in nature and in grace, though He be tied down to no hard and fast rules. Weaned from the World By His mighty work of illumination and conviction, with the humiliation which is wrought in the soul, the Spirit effectually weans the heart forever from the comfort, pleasure, satisfaction or joy that is to be found in sin, or in any creature, so that his soul can never be quiet and contented, happy or satisfied, till it finds the comfort of God in Christ. Once the soul is made to feel that sin is the greatest of all evils, it sours for him

the things of the world, he has lost his deep relish for them forever, and nothing is now so desirable unto him as the favor of God. All creature comforts have been everlastingly marred and spoiled, and unless he finds comfort in the Lord there is none for him anywhere. "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her" (Hosea 2:14). When God would win His church's heart to Him, what does He do? He brings her into "the wilderness," that is, into a place which is barren or devoid of all comforts and delights; and then and there He "speaks comfort to her." Thus, too, He deals with the individual. A man who has been effectually convicted by the Spirit is like a man condemned to die: what pleasure would be derived from the beautiful flowers as a murderer was led through a lovely garden to the place of execution! Nor can any Spirit-convicted sinner find contentment in anything till he is assured of the favor of Him whom he has so grievously offended. And none but God can "speak comfortably" to one so stricken. The Nature of the Spirit's Comforting in Suffering Though God acts as a sovereign, and does not always shine in the same conspicuous way into the hearts of all His children, nevertheless, He brings them all to see light in His light: to know and feel that there can be no salvation for them but in the Lord alone. By the Spirit's powerful illuminating and convicting operations the sinner is made to realize the awful disparity there is between God and himself, so that he feebly cries, "How can a poor wretch like me ever stand before such a holy God, whose righteous Law I have broken in so many ways, and whose ineffable majesty I have so often insulted?" By that light the convicted soul, eventually, is made to feel its utter inability to help itself, or take one step toward the obtainment of holiness and happiness. By that light the quickened soul both sees and feels there can be no access to God, no acceptance with Him, save through the Person and blood of Christ; but how to get at Christ the stricken soul knows not. "And I will give her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope" (Hosea 2:15): such is the comforting promise of God to the one whom He proposes to "allure" or win unto Himself. First, He hedges up the sinner's way with "thorns" (Hosea 2:6), piercing his conscience with the sharp arrows of conviction. Second, He effectually battles all his attempts to drown his sorrows and find satisfaction again in his former lovers (v. 7). Third, He discovers his spiritual nakedness, and makes all his mirth to cease (vv. 10, 11). Fourth, He brings him into "the wilderness" (v. 14), making him feel his case is desperate indeed. And then, when all hope is gone, when the poor sinner feels there is no salvation for him, "a door of hope" is opened for him even in "the valley of Achor" or "trouble," and what is that "door of hope" but the mercy of God! It is by putting into his mind thoughts of God's mercy that the Spirit supports the fainting heart of the convicted sinner from sinking beneath abject despair. Now it is that the blessed Spirit helps his infirmities with "groanings that cannot be uttered," and in the midst of a thousand fears he is moved to cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner." But "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22)—true alike of the initial entrance into the kingdom of grace and the ultimate entrance into the kingdom of glory. The Lord heard the "groaning" of the poor Hebrews in Egypt, and "had respect unto them" (Ex. 2:23-25), nevertheless, He saw it was good for them to pass through yet sorer trials before He delivered them. The deliverer was presented to them and hope was kindled in their hearts (Ex. 4:29-31), yet the time appointed for their exodus from the house of bondage had not yet arrived. And why was the deliverance of the Hebrews delayed after Moses had been made manifest before them? Why were they caused to experience yet more sorely the enmity of Pharaoh? Ah, the Lord would make them to feel their impotence as well as their wretchedness, and would exhibit more fully His power over the enemy. So it is very often (if not always) in the experience of the quickened soul. Satan is now permitted to rage against him with increased violence and fury (Zech. 3:1). The Devil accuses him of his innumerable iniquities, intensifies his remorse, seeks to persuade him that he has committed the unpardonable sin, assures him he has transgressed beyond all possibility of Divine mercy, and tells him his case is hopeless. And, my reader, were the poor sinner left to himself, the Devil would surely succeed in making him do as

Judas did! But, blessed be His name, the Holy Spirit does not desert the convicted soul, even in its darkest hour: He secretly upholds it and grants at least temporary respites, as the Lord did the Hebrews in Egypt. The poor Satan-harassed soul is enabled "against hope to believe in hope" (Rom. 4:18) and to cry, "Let the sighing of the prisoner come before Thee: according to the greatness of Thy power, preserve Thou those that are appointed to destruction" (Ps. 79:11). Yet before deliverance is actually experienced, before that peace which passeth all understanding is communicated to his heart, before the redemption "which is in Christ Jesus" becomes his conscious portion, the soul is made to feel its complete impotence to advance one step toward the same, that it is entirely dependent upon the Spirit for that faith which will enable him to "lay hold of Christ." No Place for a "Decision" to Be Saved One would naturally suppose that the good news of a free Savior and a full salvation would readily be embraced by a convicted sinner. One would think that, as soon as he heard the glad tidings, he could not forbear exclaiming, in a transport of joy, "This is the Savior I want! His salvation is every way suited to my wretchedness. What can I desire more? Here will I rest." But as a matter of fact this is not always the case, yea, it is rarely so. Instead, the stricken sinner, like the Hebrews in Egypt after Moses had been made manifest before them, is left to groan under the lash of his merciless taskmasters. Yet this arises from no defect in God's gracious provision, nor because of any inadequacy in the salvation which the Gospel presents, nor because of any distress in the sinner which the Gospel is incapable of relieving; but because the workings of self-righteousness hinder the sinner from seeing the fullness and glory of Divine grace. Strange as it may sound to those who have but a superficial and non-experimental acquaintance with God's Truth, awakened souls are exceedingly backward from receiving comfort in the glorious Gospel of Christ. They think they are utterly unworthy and unfit to come to Christ just as they are, in all their vileness and filthiness. They imagine some meetness must be wrought in them before they are qualified to believe the Gospel, that there must be certain holy dispositions in their hearts before they are entitled to conclude that Christ will receive them. They fear that they are not sufficiently humbled under a sense of sin, that they have not a suitable abhorrence of it, that their repentance is not deep enough; that they must have fervent breathings after Christ and pantings after holiness before they can be warranted to seek salvation with a well-grounded hope of success. All of which is the same thing as hugging the miseries of unbelief in order to obtain permission to believe. Burdened with guilt and filled with terrifying apprehensions of eternal destruction, the convicted sinner yet experimentally ignorant of the perfect righteousness which the Gospel reveals for the justification of the ungodly, strives to obtain acceptance with God by his own labors, tears, and prayers. But as he becomes better acquainted with the high demands of the Law, the holiness of God, and the corruptions of his own heart, he reaches the point where he utterly despairs of being justified by his own strivings. "What must I do to be saved?" is now his agonized cry. Diligently searching God's Word for light and help, he discovers that "faith" is the all-important thing needed, but exactly what faith is, and how it is to be obtained, he is completely at a loss to ascertain. Well-meaning people, with more zeal than knowledge, urge him to "believe," which is the one thing above all others he desires to do, but finds himself utterly unable to perform. If saving faith were nothing more than a mere mental assent to the contents of John 3:16, then any man could make himself a true believer whenever he pleased—the supernatural enablement of the Holy Spirit would be quite unnecessary. But saving faith is very much more than a mental assenting to the contents of any verse of Scripture; and when a soul has been Divinely quickened and awakened to its awful state by nature, it is made to realize that no creature-act of faith, no resting on the bare letter of a text by a "decision" of his own will, can bring pardon and peace. He is now made to realize that "faith" is a Divine gift (Eph. 2:8, 9), and not a creature work; that it is wrought by "the operation of God" (Col. 2:12), and not by the sinner himself. He is now made conscious of the fact that if ever he is to be saved, the same God who invites him to believe (Isa. 45:22), yea, who commands

him to believe (1 John 3:23), must also impart faith to him (Eph. 6:23). Cannot you see, dear reader, that if a saving belief in Christ were the easy matter which the vast majority of preachers and evangelists of today say it is, that the work of the Spirit would be quite unnecessary? Ah, is there any wonder that the mighty power of the Spirit of God is now so rarely witnessed in Christendom?—He has been grieved, insulted, quenched, not only by the skepticism and worldliness of "Modernists," but equally so by the creature-exalting free-willism and self-ability of man to "receive Christ as his personal Savior" of the "Fundamentalists"!! Oh, how very few today really believe those clear and emphatic words of Christ, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me (by His Spirit) draw him" (John 6:44). Ah, my reader, when GOD truly takes a soul in hand, He brings him to the end of himself He not only convicts him of the worthlessness of his own works, but He convinces him of the impotence of his will. He not Only strips him of the filthy rags of his own self-righteousness, but He empties him of all self-sufficiency. He not only enables him to perceive that there is "no good thing" in him (Rom. 7:18), but he also makes him feel he is "without strength" (Rom. 5:6). Instead of concluding that he is the man whom God will save, he now fears that he is the man who must be lost forever. He is now brought down into the very dust and made to feel that he is no more able to savingly believe in Christ than he can climb up to Heaven. We are well aware that what has been said above differs radically from the current preaching of this decadent age; but we will appeal to the experience of the Christian reader. Suppose you had just suffered a heavy financial reverse and were at your wits' end to know how to make ends meet: bills are owing, your bank has closed, you look in vain for employment, and are filled with fears over future prospects. A preacher calls and rebukes your unbelief, bidding you lay hold of the promises of God. That is the very thing which you desire to do, but can you by an act of your own will? Or, a loved one is suddenly snatched from you: your heart is crushed, grief overwhelms you. A friend kindly bids you to, "sorrow not even as others who have no hope." Are you able by a "personal decision" to throw off your anguish and rejoice in the Lord? Ah, my reader, if a mature Christian can only "cast all his care" upon the Lord by the Holy Spirit 's gracious enablement, do you suppose that a poor sinner who is yet "in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity" can lay hold of Christ by a mere act of his own will? Just as to trust in the Lord with all his heart, to be anxious for nothing, to let the morrow take care of its own concerns, is the desire of every Christian, but "how to perform that which is good" he "finds not" (Rom. 7:18), until the Holy Spirit is pleased to graciously grant the needed enablement. The one supreme yearning of the awakened and convicted sinner is to lay hold of Christ, but until the Spirit draws him to Christ, he finds he has no power to go out of himself, no ability to embrace what is proffered him in the Gospel. The fact is, my reader, that the heart of a sinner is as naturally indisposed for loving and appropriating the things of God, as the wood which Elijah laid on the altar was to ignite, when he had poured so much water upon it, as not only to saturate the wood, but also to fill the trench round about it (1 Kings 18:33)—a miracle is required for the one as much as it was for the other. The fact is that if souls were left to themselves—to their own "free will"—after they had been truly convicted of sin, none would ever savingly come to Christ! A further and distinct operation of the Spirit is still needed to actually "draw" the heart to close with Christ Himself. Were the sinner left to himself, he would sink in abject despair; he would fall victim to the malice of Satan. The Devil is far more powerful than we are, and never is his rage more stirred than when he fears he is about to lose one of his captives: see Mark 9:20. But blessed be His name, the Spirit does not desert the soul when His work is only half done: He who is "the Spirit of life" (Rom. 8:2) to quicken the dead, He who is "the Spirit of truth" (John 16:13) to instruct the ignorant, is also "the Spirit of faith" (2 Cor. 4:13) to enable us to savingly believe. How the Spirit Comforts And how does the Spirit work faith in the convicted sinner's heart? By effectually testifying to him of the sufficiency of Christ for his every need; by assuring him of the Savior's readiness to receive the vilest who come to Him. He effectually teaches him that no good qualifications need to be sought, no righteous acts

performed, no penance endured in order to fit us for Christ. He reveals to the soul that conviction of sin, deep repenting, a sense of our utter helplessness, are not grounds of acceptance with Christ, but simply a consciousness of our spiritual wretchedness, rendering relief in a way of grace truly welcome. Repentance is needful not as inducing Christ to give, but as disposing us to receive. The Spirit moves us to come to Christ in the very character in which alone He receives sinners—as vile, ruined, lost. Thus, from start to finish "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9)—of the Father in ordaining it, of the Son in purchasing it, of the Spirit in applying it.

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