Spirit of Promise

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A Promise and the Time Between

There is an incredible promise made for the people of God in Second Corinthians. Paul writes:

> For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:1–8)

In these verses Paul gives certain assurances. He talks about the promises of God. And don’t you need a promise when you find that you have been given super-abundant, confident promises, that He will never leave you or forsake you, that, as Psalm 91 says, He will not allow you to dash your foot against a stone, and yet you live in the time between the promise and the fulfillment of the promise? In that interval there is a thing that’s going on, and that thing is life.

Life has its ups and downs. Life has its challenges. It gives, and it takes. So far, none of us has gotten out of this life alive. Not even Jesus. He died.

So promises are made, but we do not always see the fulfillment of those promises every day. What we do have is this: we have a guarantee that has been given to us by God, the Spirit. The Spirit is our guarantee.

The Holy Spirit of Promise

Paul, the same author, writes in Ephesians:

> In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:13–14)

We have been given the Holy Spirit of promise. That phrase is full of meaning, and it is tied to another phrase here: the gospel of your salvation. That gospel is the word delivered beforehand to Abraham, that in him and in his seed all the nations of the world would be blessed. That is the good news. The good news is that every man, woman, and child who has ever lived or breathed has an opportunity to receive the life of God. That life of God, through the Spirit, is new creation.

When God spoke the first creation, He called it good. Then something happened, and we see things in our world that are not good. The earth does not always yield its plenty. Humans do not always behave humanly. We pray for a baby in the womb, dreaming dreams over that child, and the parents face a diagnosis they did not anticipate and a surgery they did not plan. Between that creation, which was good, and the world we live in now, something has occurred that has made some things not good.

I looked out my back window this morning at the colors and the scheme of creation, and I thought, beautiful. But it was shadowed: shadowed by loss, shadowed by the kind of prayer requests we lift in this room week after week. When we stand back and look at the good creation of God and the potentiality of it, and yet the lack of achievement of that goodness, we cry out with groanings, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, that this earthly tent might put on immortality, that this mortal might put on immortality.

But now we have been given something. We have been given the very life that created the original good universe. That good-creation life of the Spirit now dwells in us through Jesus Christ. Paul calls it the good news of your salvation, which you have received by believing, and you were sealed in that belief with the Holy Spirit of promise. The promise is the promise made to Abraham, and it is a guarantee that we will receive the inheritance, the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

The Blessing of Abraham

Galatians 3 may be the shortest summary of the gospel in the New Testament: apart from Genesis 18:17–18, where the gospel is first preached to Abraham. Paul writes:

> Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:13–14)

There is the good news. We are included in the blessing of Abraham, and the content of that blessing is the promise of the Spirit. If we do not have the Spirit, we do not have life. This is the blessing of Abraham, promised to us beforehand, and it has now been given. A few verses later Paul continues:

> But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. . . . For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:22, 26–29)

The inheritance Paul describes in Ephesians 1, the redemption of our bodies, the groaning of the mortal that desires to put on immortality, all of it is facilitated through a promise made to a barren man and his wife thousands of years ago. That promise still holds something for us today. The promise of Abraham's blessing, passed through to his children and on to the nations, turns out to be the promise of the Spirit. That is the dwelling of God. That is the presence of God with us.

Where God Dwells

Up to the time of Christ, where was the dwelling place of God? According to Exodus 40, it was the tabernacle in the wilderness. Moses ministered there, the priests ministered there, and the presence of God came and dwelt in that place: heavy. The presence descended into that holy of holies where the Ark of the Covenant stood.

A thousand years go by, and Solomon builds the temple. As the temple is dedicated, one hundred and twenty priests stand blowing trumpets, making a sound and ministering before the Lord. The presence of the glory of God came and dwelt in that place so heavily that the one hundred and twenty trumpeting priests could not minister by reason of the cloud. The Spirit of God was so thick in that place that they could not minister.

Yet the temple standing in Jesus' day has no such record. There is no account of the presence of God filling that place the way it filled Moses' tabernacle or Solomon's temple. They built it after the Babylonian captivity, and for about four hundred and fifty years they kept worship around it, but nothing extraordinary ever happened. Haggai had promised that something extraordinary would happen there, that the Lord of glory Himself would come to that house.

And on the week of Jesus' death, He is walking through that temple's precincts, and the disciples are admiring the architecture: "Look at this temple, look at these beautiful stones. How magnificent." He says to them, "You see these stones? Not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down." The King of glory had come to His temple, and the temple had rejected Him.

John writes: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father." The word translated "dwelt" means tabernacled. The glory of God was now tabernacling in a Person. They were looking for something to dwell in the temple, but now it was dwelling in a Person.

Pentecost: Glory in a New Temple

Then comes the day of Pentecost. Just before His ascension, Jesus tells His disciples:

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Something was going to come upon them: the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit of promise, the blessing of Abraham, the gift that would now constitute the people of God and make them witnesses to the ends of the earth, beginning in Jerusalem.

These men were already saved, in the sense that they had believed in Jesus and been baptized in water. But they were going to receive the power when the Holy Spirit would come upon them. The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon these disciples in this way. We tend to mash all of this together, and there is a sense in which Paul does the same: he speaks of being justified, receiving the Spirit, and inheriting the promise as one bundled reality. But these disciples were experiencing it in real time, one stage at a time.

Go back to John 7. It is the Feast of Tabernacles, the great day of the feast. Picture the scene. The priests are reenacting the imagery from the closing chapters of Ezekiel, where water flows from the threshold of the cosmic temple: first ankle-deep, then to the knees, then to the thighs, then waters to swim in. That water flows down from the temple, off the hill of Jerusalem, out into the brackish waters of the Dead Sea, and everything it touches comes to life. The desert becomes a garden. The Dead Sea teems with fish. Wherever those waters go, dead things live.

So at the feast, the priests carry great jars of water on their shoulders, climb the steps, and pour the water out on the threshold. It is the dry season. The water trickles down the stones, and the whole crowd watches, salivating in the heat, imagining the day when this cosmic temple would actually pour out rivers that bring everything to life.

In that solemn moment, Jesus cries out: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” Imagine the disturbance. No wonder they wanted to kill Him. The whole crowd turns and looks. “You want living water? You come to Me and drink.” And it is not water for the drinker

only. It is the blessing of Abraham, “In you and in your seed all the nations of the world will be blessed.” The blessing is transferable. You receive, you drink, and out of your belly become rivers of living water flowing out into the world to other people.

Then John, lest we miss the point, adds: “This He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” Whatever the move of the Spirit had been before Jesus, something would be different afterward. Before the cross and resurrection, God was at work in the earth. After Jesus’ glorification at the right hand of the Father, the Spirit would no longer dwell merely with us, but in us. No longer laws written on tablets of stone, but the Spirit writing the laws of God on the fleshly tablets of the heart. That is where the whole story was going, to Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

A New Kind of Temple

They did not have to wait long. Acts 1 tells us that in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, the number of names together was about one hundred and twenty. Notice the symmetry. Solomon built his temple, and one hundred and twenty priests ministered when the glory came. The greater than Solomon, as Jesus called Himself, was now building a greater temple, and He told them, “Stay here until you are endued with power from on high.” There they were: about one hundred and twenty, praying.

> When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1–4)

Under the old order, when the one hundred and twenty priests felt the presence of God, they went silent. They could not minister. Something different is happening now. What Jesus was about was an indwelling presence of God that does not paralyze but empowers: That does not make us mute, but gives us words and expression. When God enters into a human being, He gives that person expression. He causes us to be the fullest expression of who He created us to be. By one Spirit we are all baptized into one body, the body of Jesus, and we are all members in particular, with unique functions. Thank God.

This is why I have a hesitation about some expressions of traditional Pentecostalism, only insofar as they make us slaves to the presence of God, swinging from chandeliers, robbed of agency. God uses all of that, by the way, so do not dismiss it. Many of us have swung from our share of chandeliers, and they were good days. But is that finally what God is wanting? Is God Master and we slave? Jesus says, “The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. . . . Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant.” Why does Jesus say that? Because He is a God who serves. He is not a God who masters us into puppetry. That is what the pagan oracles did. That is what the demons did; they took control of their agents.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 14, says, “I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.” Everything we do in the Spirit of God is an act of the will, even as we yield our will to the will of God. As we receive His new-creation power, we are not turned into the dumb idols Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 12. We become the full expression of what God has called us to be in His Spirit, fully animated.

That is something the old covenant could never do. In Solomon's temple, the one hundred and twenty priests could not minister by reason of the cloud. But what happens to us through the Spirit is something that comes within us and allows us to speak out the glorifying words of God in a way that was never possible before. The blessing we receive becomes a conduit of blessing to the world. Moses, when he came down from the presence of God, had to put a veil over his face. But Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3 and 4 that the veil has been taken away in Christ Jesus. Now we behold, in the face of Jesus Christ, the glory of God, and we are being transformed into that very same image. The transformation begins when we believe in Jesus and receive His Spirit, and it gets communicated outward, into the world.

We are not dwarfed by God's presence. We are not stripped of agency by God's presence. We are enlivened by the presence of God, to be fully who He has called us to be.

The Samaritans Receive

Acts 2 tells us that there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. That detail is a wink. Those devout Jews from every nation are going to leave Jerusalem after what they have seen and heard, and they are going to carry it home into all nations. This was the Pentecost to end all Pentecosts, and the one we still get to dwell in. What did they hear? "The wonderful works of God" (Acts 2:11).

That covered Jerusalem. Through the seventh chapter of Acts, the disciples continue to share the message throughout Jerusalem and Judea. Then Philip, who had been appointed to wait on tables for the Greek widows, goes out to Samaria. Acts 8 says:

> Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many

> who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was great joy in that city. (Acts 8:5–8)

We need the unclean spirits to come out. When we are cleansed of our idols, then the Spirit of God can come in. We are no longer driven by our passions or by the spirits of this age, but brought in to be fully human by the Spirit of God. There was great joy in that city. Why? Because they had heard good news, that even Samaritans could become children of Abraham.

> But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. . . . Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:12, 14–17)

This shows that you can receive the joy of salvation, you can receive the baptism of salvation, and still lack something that will make you a free new-creation agent of God. These can happen simultaneously, and often they do, but in the case of the Samaritans, for whatever reason, Peter and John had to come down, pray for them, and lay hands on them.

When Simon, the former sorcerer, saw that the Holy Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money. Ask yourself: if Peter and John were merely tapping people on the head and saying, "Receive the Holy Ghost, receive the Holy Ghost," with nothing visible happening, why would Simon want to pay for that? Why would he buy something only implied and never seen? Luke says Simon saw. The Holy Spirit, when received,

is demonstrated, not merely implied. It is received through prayer, through an openness of heart, and the new creation begins to show.

Cornelius and the Gentiles

So Jews have received, half-Jews have received, and now we come to Acts 10. Peter is on the rooftop of a friend's house and falls into a trance. He sees a sheet let down from heaven full of unclean animals, and he hears a voice: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." He answers, "I have never eaten anything common or unclean." The vision repeats three times.

As Peter is coming out of it, there is a knock at the door. Messengers have arrived from the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion who commands a hundred men. Cornelius has had his own vision: an angel told him to send for one Peter, lodging at the house of Simon the tanner, and that this Peter was the man to listen to.

Peter realizes that God is afoot, doing something extraordinary. Even though Jesus had said, "You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth," Peter may have been thinking, Jews to the ends of the earth, devout men from every nation. He had not yet caught the full sweep of it. Give yourself a break. If you do not always understand what God is doing, you are in good company. Sometimes it takes a lifetime to figure out how He is working out His plan.

Peter arrives, and Cornelius says, in effect, "We are all here. Tell us what God has commanded you to say." Peter opens his mouth:

> In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ, He is Lord of all, that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism

> which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. (Acts 10:34–38)

God is the anointer, the Holy Spirit is the anointing, and Jesus is the Anointed One. When we come into Christ, we receive that anointing. Peter continues:

> And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins. (Acts 10:39–43)

In Acts 2, when Peter preached to those devout Jews from every nation, they were pricked in the heart and asked, “What shall we do?” Peter answered, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” And that is exactly what they did: they repented, were baptized, received the Spirit. The order was tidy.

But these crazy Gentiles in Cornelius’ house were not waiting around for a formula. We should not be applying our formulas to how our brothers and sisters in other places find their way into Jesus Christ. Luke is showing the formula in one sense (Jew, Samaritan, and Gentile all come to Christ similarly) but each will have its uniqueness. These Gentiles leaped over the wall of the kingdom of God. They did not walk through the front door. They did not wait. They did

not pray a sinner's prayer. They were just standing there listening, and it was spontaneous combustion of worship.

> While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. (Acts 10:44–46)

We must believe that the God of all creation is going to get into people's lives by hook or by crook. Whatever it takes, He will fill them. The believing heart, lifted up to Him by whatever means, by whatever path, the open heart will be filled. Jesus said, "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!" You ask, you receive. The commentary is over.

And once received, the Spirit ushers out an outflowing of love and grace, righteousness and justice, the way of the Lord begins to spawn from that life. You want to know whether the car in your driveway has gas in it? Go out there and start it. If it drives down the road, it has gas. When you look at Christians who are living the life, showing the way, being who God has called them to be, you can believe God that they have gas in the tank. We do not have to question with doubtful disputations whether they are brothers or sisters in the Lord. God has given us something. If we will let it percolate, He wants us full. He does not want us dipping a toe into the Holy Spirit of life. He wants us baptized in the Holy Spirit of promise. He wants us coming up out of those waters full of the words of God, ushering forth a renewed life of righteousness and justice. Our mandate is to set all things right in this world. That is the call. That is the blessing of Abraham, that it would overflow to everyone in righteousness and justice.

They were astonished. There is a moment in The Chosen where Peter, speaking of Matthew, says something like, “That guy; he’s different.” Jesus answers, “Get used to different.” Get used to different. We start putting God in a box. We make our forms a box, our worship a box, and then we cannot allow what He actually wants to do among us. Get used to different. Sometimes worship is a thunderclap. Sometimes worship is a silence that settles on a room and lets you know God is meaning to speak. And sometimes it is the easy chatter of someone who has just gotten home from work and has a lot to say. That is the kind of relationship we have with the Lord.

So this astonished group with Peter saw that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles, for they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” These Gentiles had got the order wrong. You are supposed to be baptized in water and then receive the Spirit. But these had received the Spirit already, and Peter is essentially saying, “What do we do now? God has already sanctioned them. They are already in. So what is the whole water thing about?” And nobody could find any verse against it, so they all said, “Let’s go find some water.” And they baptized them.

What Luke is trying to get across is that whether you are a Jew, a Samaritan, or a Gentile, you are going to be filled with life from God, and that life is not going to disable you. It is going to make you everything you were meant to be. Get used to different. Get used to being astonished about the work of God and how He continues to move from generation to generation. Something old, something new, all coming together to create what we have. And for a thousand generations it will continue to create exactly what future generations need. Peter says it himself

in Acts 2: “The promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” That is you and me, as many as the Lord our God will call.

The Dwelling Place of God

What does all of this make us? Ephesians 1 told us that you heard the word, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, to the praise of His glory. That glory (that Holy Spirit, that dwelling place that filled tabernacle and temple in ages past) Paul follows up in Ephesians 2:

> For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:18–22)

“We both” means Jew and Gentile. We both have access by one Spirit to the Father. The strangers and foreigners could not enter the temple. They had to stay outside. There was a court for Gentiles, a court for women, a court for men, and a court for priests. The architecture itself preached that if you were a foreigner, you were the most unclean and had to stay farthest from the holy place where the glory of God dwelt. If you were a Jewish woman, you were a step closer. If you were a Jewish man, closer still. If you were a priest, you had access to the presence of God. Only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies. Do you see this gradation of holiness?

We were strangers and foreigners. Now we are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. We have been given full citizenship. Then Paul changes the metaphor: We are no longer only a family, we are now a building, built on the foundation of the

apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building is being fitly framed together. It is an ever-expanding organism that is also a building of stones (living, breathing stones) which is also the household of God, which means we receive all the inheritance and the promises of God. It is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

We are the dwelling place of God. We no longer have to come to a building. It is convenient and good to worship together here, and I want to worship with you. I can worship alone in my bedroom or in my office. But there is something that happens when we sing together: I find myself transcending into the third heaven, hearing words it is not lawful to utter, knowing God is doing something in that gathered space that He does not always do in any other place.

This is the ultimate promise of Isaiah 66, where God promises a new heavens and a new earth and where Gentiles and Jews dwell together in the great city. It is the chapter behind Revelation 21, the New Jerusalem. And it begins like this:

> Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made. . . . But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word. (Isaiah 66:1–2)

God is saying, in effect, “I do not need buildings. I need you. You are My dwelling place.” Do you tremble at His word? Is the good news still good news to you? Did it reach you wherever you came from? It reaches to the highest mountain and flows to the lowest valley. The blood that gives me strength from day to day will never lose its power. It has not lost its power on me. As a ten- or eleven-year-old boy, I received the Spirit, believed in God under preaching,

and that work has lasted all these years. I am fifty-seven, and I still feel the presence of God dwelling in me, saying, “You are My son. You are not only My household, an inheritor of all My promises: You are My dwelling place, a building fitly framed. Do not get used to being the same old man. You are going to grow along with this building and fill the entire earth.”

Can we join ourselves to one another, stone to stone, being the people God has called us to be: conduits of His grace and mercy, flowing out to this world?

The Promise Is for You

Do not walk one more day in bondage. Have the same joy as the Samaritans. Lift up your voice in praise that God is doing something, that He is pouring out His Spirit. All those dry bones, that dead army in the valley of Ezekiel 37; that was His Spirit He was prophesying into. Are you dry bones? Let God put bone to bone, sinew to flesh, and let Him breathe, as He did into Adam, the breath of life. Become a living soul, a new creation of God, sent into this world to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Something got broken, and He is setting it all right through the new-creation Spirit He has poured into our lives.

By that very Spirit poured into our hearts, Paul says, we cry out, “Abba, Father.” We have a Father, because of the Spirit.