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HOW TO RECEIVE THE BAPTISM WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT AND MAINTAIN THE FULLNESS OF THE SPIRIT (1)

We have seen that the outpouring and ministry of the Holy Spirit is a major aspect of God's provision for His children under the New Covenant in Christ's blood. We have also noted that it is God's intention that all His children be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, continually filled, led, taught and empowered by the Spirit in every aspect of their lives. In the last message, we examined some aspects of wrong understanding about the baptism with the Holy Spirit and the biblical teaching on this subject. Today, we will consider how we can be ready to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit and maintain the fullness of the Spirit in our lives.

Wider context and meaning

It is helpful to see the issue of the baptism with the Holy Spirit not just by itself but in its wider context. The role and ministry of the Holy Spirit complements the work of Christ on the Cross. It flows forth from Christ's death, resurrection, ascension and exaltation and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and helps us attain to what God has provided for us in Christ. The outworking and fulfilment of God's purposes rest on these two pillars: the work of Christ on the Cross and the role and ministry of the Holy Spirit. A third pillar would be the responsibility and response of man. Baptism with the Holy Spirit and the fullness of the Spirit are vital for the effective outworking of the role and ministry of the Holy Spirit in and through the lives of believers. The Book of Acts gives us an insight into the working of the Holy Spirit in and through the lives of the early believers after they were baptised with the Holy Spirit.

Some pertinent questions and issues

I have been emphasising the importance of baptism with the Holy Spirit and some of you may already be asking how a believer can be filled with the Holy Spirit. This may be because you are not satisfied with your walk with the Lord. God and the realities in the spiritual realm do not seem so real to you; you lack the strength to overcome your weaknesses and you also lack the peace and joy of the Lord. You know you are not living an overcoming life.

You may be among those who are not clear whether you are filled with the Holy Spirit. So you may want to know whether you are filled with the Holy Spirit, what the indications are and what you can do if you are not sure whether you are filled.

Some of you may have sought to experience the fullness of the Holy Spirit but do not seem to be successful. And you may wonder what it is that is hindering you from entering into this reality in your life.

For those who have experienced the fullness of the Holy Spirit, you may not be sure whether you are still filled with the Spirit because it does not seem to be a present reality. So you may want to know whether it is possible to cease to be filled with the Spirit and how you can ensure that you are filled and continue to be filled with the Spirit.

All these are related questions and issues. It is important for us to be clear about them as the fullness of the Holy Spirit is vital not only for our own growth but also for service and the fulfilment of God's purposes. All these issues will be covered in the six messages on "The Spirit-filled life".

How to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit and maintain the fullness of the Spirit

The Lord Jesus is the One who baptises us with the Holy Spirit. How do we prepare our hearts so that we will be ready for the baptism with the Holy Spirit? The following points can help us understand how to prepare ourselves. As we fulfil the conditions for being filled, we can trust the Lord to baptise us with the Holy Spirit.

As we go through the various points, do note that many of them bear a relationship with the role and ministry of the Holy Spirit. If we want to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit and maintain the Spirit-filled life, we must align our hearts in the direction of the role and ministry of the Holy Spirit and what He desires to do in and through our lives.

It is helpful to review our lives from time to time by prayerfully going through these points as they are all critical for our walk with God. They can help us to live each day with a sense of direction, meaning and purpose, and to maintain and deepen our experience of the Spirit-filled life.

1. Recognising the importance of being baptised with the Holy Spirit

To prepare ourselves to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit, we need to recognise the importance of being baptised and filled with the Holy Spirit and maintaining the fullness of the Spirit in our lives. Baptising us with the Holy Spirit is a major aspect of the role and ministry of Christ. John the Baptist testifies in Mark 1:8: "He (the Lord Jesus) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit". This issue has great significance for our lives and the fulfilment of God's purposes. We must therefore be deeply convicted about it.

2. Recognising that it is God's will for all His children to be baptised with the Holy Spirit

We must also recognise that it is God's will for all His children to be baptised and filled with the Holy Spirit and to maintain the fullness of the Spirit. If you are of the view that baptism with the Holy Spirit is only for some, then you can never approach this area with confidence.

God has promised through the prophecy of Joel that He will pour forth His Spirit on all mankind. This promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. In 2 Corinthians 3:6, the apostle Paul says we are "servants of a new covenant... of the Spirit".

2 Corinthians 3:6

who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit is a major feature in the New Covenant. When we are filled with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit has great freedom to work in and through our lives. And that is why Paul urges all believers to be filled and continue to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18). His exhortation applies to those who have never experienced the baptism with the Holy Spirit as well as those who have, that they continue to be filled.

It is God's will for us to be baptised with the Holy Spirit and if we have not yet experienced it, we can and ought to do something about it. Pentecost has taken place and the Holy Spirit has already been poured forth. We need not wait any further.

3. Recognising the need and longing for the fullness of the Spirit

To facilitate the experience of the baptism with the Holy Spirit, it is important for us to recognise our need and have a deep longing for the fullness of the Spirit. But the proper motivation is crucial. If our motivation is wrong or not consistent with the role and ministry of the Holy Spirit, it will be a significant hindrance towards the Lord baptising us with the Holy Spirit. The proper motivation is elaborated in the points that follow. There is much overlap in the areas covered by these points.

4. Longing to glorify Christ

The Holy Spirit comes to glorify Christ (John 16:14). If we want to be baptised with the Holy Spirit, our primary motivation must be to glorify Christ in our lives and not to project ourselves in any way. For example, we may seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit because we long for and we enjoy the experience of power. It may even be power for service. But it is tainted by the desire for recognition and the praise of men rather than by the desire to glorify Christ.

How do we glorify Christ? We glorify Christ when we enter into all that Christ has accomplished for us at the Cross and all that we can find in Him. God has already blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ but we may have experienced little of these things. We long to enter more deeply into these realities in Christ and the fullness of the Spirit enables us to do so. We also glorify Christ when we become conformed to His image, for this is God's will for us. And when Christ is formed in us, Christ is glorified. Christ is also glorified when we are effective witnesses and faithful servants of Christ, living in submission and obedience to Him.

But you may say all these are meaningful things and all believers would long for them. Surely all believers would want to enter into all that God intends for us in Christ; we all want to be conformed to His image; we all want to be effective witnesses and faithful servants of the Lord. But these things come with a cost. And, many believers do actually turn away from identifying more deeply with these longings when they recognise more clearly the cost of true discipleship.

For example, we may say we want to be faithful servants of the Lord. But do we truly long to be faithful servants of the Lord with all the implications? And there are many implications. We must be prepared to give up living according to our own inclinations and desires, and be faithful to the Lord even when it involves pain and suffering, and doing things we do not like to do. How strong is our longing to be true to the Lord, to be His faithful servants, that we may glorify Him in our lives?

To be in a position to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit does not mean we have to be working out our lives very well in obedience to the Lord. If we want to honour the Lord but often fail because we lack the strength, that does not mean we are not ready to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit. The fullness of the Spirit is precisely intended for those who recognise they are not living out their lives well. What is critical in preparing us to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit is a genuine longing to obey the Lord, to submit to Him and to be faithful to Him. And we come to the Lord that He may baptise and fill us with the Spirit, so that we may truly live out a life of submission and obedience to Him. We know we are weak and we often falter and fail, but there is a deep longing in our hearts to glorify Christ in our lives and we desire to live an overcoming life by His enabling.

5. Longing to know the truth and walk in truth

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth and He has come to guide us into all the truth (John 16:13). A primary purpose of the Lord Jesus baptising us with the Holy Spirit is that we may know the truth, walk in truth and that truth may be formed in our innermost being. Psalm 51:6 tells us that God desires truth in the innermost being. A deep longing in our heart to know the truth that we may walk in truth is a major factor for our readiness to receive the fullness of the Spirit.

To walk in truth requires us to turn away from darkness and all that is contrary to walking in truth. We have to say no to many things that are attractive to the flesh.

To walk in truth can also be painful and difficult. Are we prepared to walk in the truth at such times? You may say, "Yes, I want to but I am weak. I am not only lacking in strength, even my will is weak." The Lord can strengthen us, even our will and resolve to walk in the truth. But we must pray over these areas so that our desire to walk in truth will not be a superficial desire but one that will grow by God's grace into a deep resolve. We are committed to this path, knowing that there are many implications. And as the Lord helps us, we will by His grace walk in truth.

6. Longing to be holy as God is holy

A prominent characteristic of the Holy Spirit is holiness. In our desire to be filled with the Spirit, there must be the longing to be holy. Not the kind of holiness according to human thinking, but the kind that is according to the holiness of God. Holiness is an essential aspect of God's call for His children as can be seen in His commandment to the Israelites in Leviticus 11:45 and quoted by the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 1:16: "You shall be holy, for I am holy". We know that we are far short of the glory of God. We are weak and unable to be holy as God is holy. Therefore we look to the Lord to baptise us with the Spirit so that we can grow in holiness. We long to be pure in heart and life, to turn away from evil and pursue righteousness and all that is pleasing to the Lord.

7. Longing for sanctification by the Spirit

When we are sanctified by the Spirit, our inner being will be transformed and our character developed. We will also be moving towards the full salvation that God intends for His children.

2 Thessalonians 2:13

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.

This is a key verse in the Scriptures. God has chosen us from the very beginning for salvation. He wants us to go on after conversion to grow in moral and spiritual stature and experience the full salvation that He intends for us in Christ through "sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth".

There are many things within our hearts that are not right and not pleasing to God. Do we long to be sanctified by the Spirit so that we may be transformed in our inner being and develop our character? The process of transformation can be painful and difficult. When the Holy Spirit seeks to transform us, He will reveal our deficiencies and the areas of our lives that are not right. He may deal with our pride by allowing us to go through painful and humiliating situations, that we may learn true humility. Are we prepared for all this? Do we really want to change? Do not too quickly say, "Of course, I want to change." Prayerfully ponder over what it means and what it involves. If we really want to change, the Spirit of God will help us and bring us

through a process of transformation so that we will change by His grace, for the better.

8. Longing for the fruit of the Spirit to be formed in us and manifested in our lives

Do we long for the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – to be formed in us and manifested in our lives such that they become an abiding reality in our hearts? All these are very desirable and it may seem obvious that all believers would want to manifest all these traits in their lives.

Take love, for example. You may say, "Yes, it is my earnest desire that my heart be filled with divine love." But are you willing to love people who are difficult to love? God wants you to love and He is prepared to help you. Are you prepared to cooperate with God, to exercise yourself in various expressions of true love, as the Spirit of God leads you, even at great cost to yourself? The qualities of patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control are closely related to love and the expression of love. There are many situations where it can be very difficult to be patient and kind. Are you willing to be patient and kind when you are misunderstood, stretched or persecuted? Are you willing to exercise self-control, be patient, kind and loving, even when people are unreasonable and demanding?

Yes, such a life is very difficult. It is not feasible for us to live such a life except by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Do we long for the Spirit of God to fill us and work in us? If we are prepared to cooperate with God and to commit ourselves to that kind of life, we will be preparing our hearts to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

9. Longing to be a true worshipper

God is seeking for true worshippers who worship in the Spirit of God (Phil. 3:3) and worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24). True worshippers are very precious to God. The Holy Spirit desires to help us understand what it means to truly worship God in spirit and truth, and He desires to help us nurture a heart of true worship. Do we want to be true worshippers? We may readily say, "Yes, we want to be true worshippers."

But true worship is very lacking in the lives of believers. Genuine, deep and meaningful worship doesn't come about easily. It is something rare but very precious to the heart of God. Believers can easily be so occupied with activities that they neglect to nurture the quality of worship in their hearts. Do we know what it means to worship God in spirit and truth in our time of personal worship, corporate worship and every moment of our lives?

To worship God in spirit and truth, we need to exercise our spirit and we need to have an accurate understanding of God and His ways so that our worship of Him is in

line with the truth. We need to recognise that what God is primarily concerned about is the quality of our spirit and not merely participating in many activities or conforming to many rituals or practices.

It is not easy to nurture a healthy spirit and to walk in truth. Many things that this world has to offer hinder true worship. We may have to forego many things that we are naturally inclined towards, that are enjoyable to the flesh. A good soldier of the Lord Jesus must not be entangled with the affairs of this life. Are we prepared to deal decisively with all the things that hinder true worship and the nurturing of a healthy spirit? If we long to be true worshippers and are committed in that direction, the Spirit of God will be glad to come upon us and fill us and help us.

10. Longing to be effective in praise, worship, thanksgiving and mutual edification in the truth

Ephesians 5:18-20

18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit,

19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord;

20 always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father;

When the apostle Paul exhorts us in verse 18 to be filled with the Spirit, he immediately goes on to say: "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs... ". This refers to spiritual mutual edification in the truth, in a spirit of thanksgiving.

The Spirit of God helps us to be effective in praise, worship, thanksgiving and mutual edification in the truth. Do we long to be filled with the Spirit so that we can enter more deeply into this kind of life?

It is not easy to live such a life. For example, it is not easy to maintain a spirit of thanksgiving when we are suffering and in pain. Likewise, it is not easy to live a life devoted to the edification of the brethren. To faithfully do our part and share properly for mutual edification when we gather for open worship is also not easy. Many of us are not used to or are ill at ease with sharing our lives and thoughts before a large number of people. It is not easy to prepare and share meaningfully and with the right spirit. We may also experience spiritual pressures as a result of our participation and contribution to the lives of the brethren and to body-life.

The Spirit of God will help us to be effective in praise, worship, thanksgiving and mutual edification in the truth. But we need to exercise ourselves and be prepared for the difficulties. Are we committed to living in this way?

11. Longing to experience richly the spiritual blessings in God's kingdom

Every believer would long to experience richly the spiritual blessings, realities and meaning in God's kingdom and to participate fully in it. These are the things that truly matter in life. The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). The Holy Spirit will help us to enter into all these realities.

To enter deeply into the riches of God's kingdom, we have to say no to the many attractions and temptations in this fallen world and to the desires of the flesh. But it does not mean when we give in to the temptations of this fallen world and fail to overcome the desires of the flesh, we do not qualify to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit. As I have said, the baptism with the Holy Spirit is intended to help those who are weak, to enable us to overcome. We don't have to be overcoming in order to be ready to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit. But are we really committed to this direction of life? Do we really know what it means and what it implies? If we are committed, then we are preparing ourselves to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit, because the Lord Jesus wants to baptise us with the Spirit so that we can enter deeply into the riches of God's kingdom.

12. Longing to be effective in prayer

Prayer is one of the most important areas of the Christian life. It is important not just for our personal relationship with God, but also for the advancement of God's kingdom. In Ephesians 6:18, the apostle Paul exhorts us to pray at all times in the Spirit. When we are filled with the Spirit, the Spirit will guide and enable us in our prayer, including what to pray and how to pray effectively in the power of the Holy Spirit.

An effective prayer life can accomplish much in the spiritual realm. Believers are attracted to this kind of prayer life. But it is not easy to nurture an effective prayer life. It requires discipline, perseverance, faith and spiritual exertion. And there will be spiritual implications and pressures. This is because as we make progress in the life of prayer, we will be engaging in spiritual warfare, seeking to overcome the work of the forces of darkness in the lives of people and nations.

To be effective in our personal prayer and in corporate prayer, we must be strongly motivated because it will be a difficult path. We must have a deep love for people and a deep conviction in our hearts to honour God and be faithful to Him. We need to have a deep longing for His kingdom to advance and His will be done. Otherwise we will not be able to persevere and fight the good fight of faith in the spiritual realm.

The Spirit of God wants to fill us and help us to nurture an effective prayer life and prevail in prayer. Will we commit ourselves to this direction with all the implications?

*13. Longing to be led by the Spirit and to walk according to the Spirit***Romans 8:14**

For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

It is a wonderful thing if we can know the Spirit's guidance because He loves us and will guide us into the path of truth and abundance. So we may readily say, "Yes, I long to be led by the Spirit and to walk according to the Spirit." But the path that the Spirit of God leads us will be according to the will of God. And to walk in the will of God will not be easy. Are we prepared to be led by the Spirit and walk in the will of God, whatever the cost?

14. Longing for power to overcome the evil one

The Holy Spirit coming upon us is associated with power. Believers seek baptism with the Holy Spirit and fullness of the Spirit because they want to be empowered by the Spirit. There is indeed a proper place for power in the Christian life. In our walk with the Lord and service for Him, we long for power to overcome the evil one and to live effectively for God. But overcoming the evil one involves spiritual warfare, which is a very complex and difficult area. The evil one is full of wiles and he can make our lives very difficult. We can experience difficulties in our body, mind and spirit. We can also experience difficulties in relationships and in our workplace. Are we prepared for the difficulties that may come?

The Lord wants us to participate in His work. We may be weak but the Lord desires to empower us to overcome the evil one. 1 John 4:4 tells us that greater is He who is in us than the evil one who is in the world. Ephesians 6:17 teaches us to take the sword of the Spirit in spiritual warfare, and this is linked to praying at all times in the Spirit.

The Spirit of God strengthens us to overcome the evil one, first of all in our personal lives. As we grow, we can then participate more and more in overcoming the evil one in the lives of others and in God's work.

Are we prepared to commit ourselves to God's call in overcoming all the works of the evil one? Yes, we need to be wise, to regulate and to know the Lord's will for us in the different stages of our life. And even when we are walking in the will of God, it does not mean we will not experience difficulties, pain and suffering. But together with that, there can be much joy and meaning and an abiding sense of satisfaction and fulfilment.

It is important that we do not shrink back. If we shrink back, even if we have initially experienced the fullness of the Spirit, the freshness of the Spirit of God at work in our lives will begin to fade. And if we continue to grieve the Spirit of God, the time may come when we may no longer experience the fullness of the Spirit.

15. Longing for power to overcome the weaknesses of the flesh

There are many aspects of the flesh that we are inclined towards because they are attractive and enjoyable, and it may be very difficult for us to turn away from them. In our walk with God, we often find ourselves overcome by the weaknesses of the flesh. So we long for power to overcome the weaknesses of the flesh. But do we really want to overcome the weaknesses of the flesh?

To overcome the weaknesses of the flesh, we need to learn to walk according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh (Rom. 8:4). We also need to learn to put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit (Rom. 8:13).

But are we prepared to deal decisively with our weaknesses as the Lord enables us? We cannot be selective in the areas we want to overcome. If we are not prepared to cooperate with the Spirit of God, we would be hindered from experiencing the fullness of the Spirit. And if we have previously experienced the fullness of the Spirit and want to maintain the fullness of the Spirit, we must be willing to deal with areas the Lord brings to our attention. If not, we will grieve the Holy Spirit and this will affect our experience of the fullness of the Spirit and the working of the Spirit in our lives.

There are other areas helpful for us to consider with regards to preparing ourselves to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit and to maintain the fullness of the Spirit. The Lord willing, we will consider them in the next message.

Conclusion

In the light of what we have been considering, prayerfully reflect over our lives. Are we ready to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit? For those of us who have experienced the baptism with the Spirit, it is helpful to review our longings and attitudes. Are they consistent with the ministry of the Holy Spirit and what He desires to bring about in our lives? Paying attention to the various areas we have considered can help us to maintain the fullness of the Spirit. They can also help us to appreciate more deeply the meaning and purpose of being filled with the Spirit and to deepen our experience of this reality so that we can enter into a deeper and richer walk with God.

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