

Truth for Today

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The Promises of Jesus: The Promise of His Power

Jesus promised His power to His apostles during the forty days He was with them between His resurrection and His ascension. During that period He explained to them their task in the coming Gospel age. He also instructed them to wait at Jerusalem until this power came upon them. "...He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of the Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high"" Luke 24:45-49. The Holy Spirit is identified by Jesus as being this power in The Acts of the Apostles 1:8: "...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". The apostles and all of the disciples received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, when the promise of Jesus was fulfilled: "[Jesus] being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit [which] He poured out" Acts 2:33.

When Jesus, the true dependent Man, was baptised by John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him and filled Him. He was then led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Following this forty-day period, Luke 4:14 records the start of the Lord Jesus' public ministry with these poignant words: "Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee". Shortly afterwards, the Lord himself explained the wonderful nature of His ministry when He quoted from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD", Luke 4:18-19.

Time and time again the Gospel writers refer to these mighty (or powerful) works of the Lord Jesus, which brought glory to His God and Father as blessings were bestowed on men. He stilled the storm on the lake. He fed the multitudes with few natural resources. He spoke and taught with wisdom and authority. He made the blind to see, the lame to walk, and the deaf to hear. He cleansed the lepers. He cast out demons with authority as well as power. Whole multitudes of the sick were healed as power went out from him. This power was even available to those who just touched the hem of His garment! The dead were raised and the poor had the Gospel preached to them. He had power to forgive sins! As Peter commented in his sermon to Cornelius' household: "...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. And we are witnesses of all things which He did" Acts 10:38-39.

The Lord Jesus continued operating by His power after returning to heaven, but now through His disciples. First of all He baptised them with the Holy Spirit, who is that promised power. From this time onwards the Holy Spirit indwelt each believer and the church. In Old Testament times God's people had accomplished great deeds when the Holy Spirit came upon them at special times. However, at Pentecost He came to remain forever with the disciples, as Jesus had promised in John 14:16-18, so that they could do the works that He had done, see John 14:12. This can be verified from the book of The Acts, where the disciples' works of healing, exorcism and blessing are recorded. Peter and John made a lame man to walk. Both Stephen and Philip performed great wonders, miracles, and signs. Ananias restored Saul's sight. Peter brought Dorcas back to life, and Paul raised Eutychus from the dead. Paul released a slave girl from evil spirits in Philippi. He also remained unharmed when a viper bit him when he was in Malta, which then gave him the opportunity to perform acts of healing upon the sick of the island. "They went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs" Mark 16:20.

The Lord continued His instructions to His disciples in John 14:12 with the amazing statement that they would do even greater works than He had done because He was going to His Father in heaven! When Jesus had completed the work of salvation upon the cross and had been raised from the dead, He was then exalted from earth to God's right hand in heaven. According to John 7:39, the giving of the Holy Spirit was the outcome of Jesus being glorified. The disciples were clothed with that same mighty power which had raised Christ from the dead and seated Him in heaven. This power was unleashed in accordance with Jesus' words: "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" John 7:38. The Holy Spirit enabled these servants of Christ to achieve even

more than He did. The shadow of Peter healed the sick as it fell on them Acts 5:15. "...God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them" Acts 19:11-12. These mighty signs and wonders Paul attributed in Romans 15:18-19 to Christ working through him by the power of the Spirit of God.

Miracles, wonders and signs do attract attention, but Jesus' promised power mainly enabled His disciples to witness to Him. (The word "power" has the meaning of the ability to carry something into effect). They testified to their risen Lord and the activities of those early Gospel days are summarised in Acts 4:33: "...with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all." The first Christian martyr, Stephen, was irresistible because he spoke with this power. Whether it was Peter, John, Stephen, Philip, Barnabas, Paul or Silas, the preaching was "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" and many people believed the Gospel as the witness spread in ever increasing circles from Jerusalem and Judea, then to Samaria onwards to Antioch, and from there outwards into the whole world. But Luke states that this expansion of the evangelism in Acts was the unstoppable power of God's word: "...the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith"; "the word of God grew and multiplied"; "so the word of God grew mightily and prevailed" Acts 6:7; 12:24 and 19:20. This increase occurred through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Helper, at work in the disciples bringing conviction of sin, righteousness and judgement to those who heard them, see John 16:7-11. Jesus also said their Helper would reveal to them the glories of the Lord Jesus so that they could give adequate witness in their testimony to the Gospel of the glory of Christ.

There was another special work that the Holy Spirit performed through the Apostles, which we could call the power of revelation and inspiration. He made good the truth to them by bringing to their remembrance all that the Lord Jesus had said to them. They wrote this down in the Gospels. As the "Spirit of Truth" He taught them all things and guided them into all the truth, enabling the New Testament to be written. He also showed them "things to come", those future events of prophecy, which are mainly found in the book of Revelation.

So far I have commented only on the manifestation of the power of Jesus in the initial days of Christianity. However, it is important to realise that this same power is given to every believer on the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul explains in Ephesians 1:13 that every Christian receives the "Holy Spirit of promise" when he hears "the word of truth" and believes the "gospel of salvation". Having been anointed with, and sealed by, the Holy Spirit believers therefore possess the same power as those first-century Christians. It's still available to us in the twenty-first century, as we seek to live for Christ! Let's make sure then that our Gospel is not just in word, but also in that power and in that assurance of the Holy Spirit. We must always remember that we who hold this treasure, the glorious Gospel, are only "earthen vessels", so that when we preach, the "excellence of the power" may be of God and not of us.

Having made the important point that the Holy Spirit within us is the promised power for witness to Christ in the gospel, I would like now to consider other ways in which He helps us in our Christian life, under the headings of: Power to Worship; Power to Live; Power to Grow; Power to Hope; and Power to Overcome.

Power to Worship

First of all, the Holy Spirit is the power to worship. Christians are those "who worship God in the Spirit and rejoice in Christ Jesus" Philippians 3:3. When the Samaritan woman at Sychar's well raised the question with the Lord Jesus in John 4:24 of the correct place to worship, He answered her: "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth". Previously in this conversation He had symbolically referred to the Holy Spirit as being "the water that I shall give" which becomes in a person "a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life" - verse 14. The Holy Spirit enables every believer to livingly respond to God the Father, who gave His Son and who is the source of all blessings. In Old Testament times worship required a special priesthood and a system of physical sacrifices. Now, in Christianity, all believers form part of that "holy priesthood", who, "as living stones" in "a spiritual house", "offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" 1 Peter 2:5. The Lord Jesus said in John 4:23 that the Father is longing for true worshippers. The following words of a hymn could be a fitting response from us:

*Blessed God and Father, in Thy sight
We bow and own Thy grace;
We worship in Thy glorious light,
Which shines in Jesus face.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, we praise Thy name
In God the Father's ear;
And worship Thee, Thou holy Lamb,
Whose blood has brought us near.*

Power to Live

We have looked at the power for witness and the power for worship. In 2 Peter 1:3 the Holy Spirit is also said to be the “divine power” who gives believers “all things that pertain to life and godliness”. He equips us with everything that is necessary for all aspects of the Christian life. He alone can enable us to live in ways that please God, even in this twenty-first century world of ours. Every Christian would admit to the reality of indwelling sin, which is always present to turn us out of the path of obedience to Christ. However, “the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” is that greater power who overcomes “the law of sin and death”. The world continually bombards believers with attractions that naturally appeal to us – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life – in order to press us into its mould. The Spirit is able to fill our minds with the glories of our risen Lord, and set them on things above. Therefore Paul exhorts us in Galatians 5:16 to “...Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.”

Power to Grow

But Paul was also aware that believers need to advance in the things of God, and to understand the distinct truths of Christianity. In Ephesians 3, after he has presented some special points about the truth of the church, called the mystery, he makes urgent prayer to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in verse 16 that those believers would “...be strengthened with [power] by His Spirit in the inner man” so that they would be able to comprehend it, as well as to know the deep love of Christ. One of my spiritual fathers once said that the prayers in Ephesians tend not to be the prayers that we pray for each other! Let’s encourage each other to pray them so that we might know the outcome: “... [the Father] ...is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” verses 20-21.

Power to Hope

Power for witness, worship, living and growing. The Holy Spirit is also the power for everything we hope for in Christ. Paul prayed in Romans 15:13: “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”. We know that our future is secure and that there is a place reserved in heaven for us. In Ephesians 1:14 the Holy Spirit of promise is described as the “guarantee of our inheritance”. This means that we too not only know the certainty of eternal life, but also the present foretaste or enjoyment of heaven itself, where we shall dwell forever with the Son of God in His Father’s home of love. The Christian hope is absolutely sure because we have already received the down payment!

Power to Overcome

Joy and peace in believing and abounding in hope do not diminish the present difficulties of the Christian life here on earth, although they do provide much comfort and consolation in them. The difficulties that Christians encounter, especially in Christian service, can be faced in the knowledge that there is also power to endure and overcome. In this respect the Apostle Paul was given “a thorn in the flesh” to keep him humble because of the many visions and revelations he had of the paradise of God. His first reactions were that this thorn was going to be a great hindrance to him in his service for the Lord. Three times he pleaded with his Lord that this obstacle would be removed. Paul recounts this experience in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. He tells of the answer he received in verse 9: “And [the Lord] said unto me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My [power] is made perfect in weakness”. Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” Once more we are confronted with the promise of Christ’s power, but this time in a most remarkable way. Paul was assured it has maximum effect where there is greatest admitted human weakness! The exact nature of his infirmity is not described, but we are informed that the word “thorn” means a stake on which men were crucified. It was therefore very painful and debilitating for Paul. The Lord would not remove it, but guaranteed sufficient of His grace for Paul to endure and get the victory. Paul says this wonderful sustaining grace is “the power of Christ”. In other words, he was actually given a special promise of the power of the Holy Spirit to be the Helper in the most extreme of difficulties and circumstances. As a result, these words of the Lord “My grace is sufficient for you” have been a real strength and comfort to believers throughout the Gospel age as they have suffered for Christ or have had to face the many varied issues of life in the weakness of a mortal body. May it be of special blessing to all believers who today find themselves in situations such as Paul who said: “Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then am I strong” verse 10.

The challenge of today’s talk is: how much do I know of the promise of the Lord’s power in my life? Some of this power was originally provided so that “the signs of an apostle” could be wrought in signs, wonders and powerful deeds. However, in all other ways His promise remains true for us today. It is possible to “grieve the Holy Spirit” by living according to the world, or according to the old nature rather than by the new nature. If He is grieved then His power will not be operative in us. Rather let’s heed the exhortation to “be filled with the Spirit” and experience the benefits of this wonderful power in our lives.

Let's pray. God our Father, we thank You for the promise of the Lord Jesus and that You have not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. Help us to be partakers of the afflictions of the Gospel according to this power. Amen.

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