

Peter's Epistles #7

The Ministry of the Holy Spirit

(also available on-line at Ichthys.com)

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Digression: In concluding our introduction to the doctrine of suffering, we saw that one of the chief ways that God helps today's Christians endure and persevere is by the supernatural support He provides through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit lives inside of all believers in Jesus Christ (Jn.14:16-17), and it is through the Spirit's ministry that we Christians receive the power to do all that God wants us to do, whether it be spiritual growth, personal ministry, or bearing up under suffering. Because of the high degree of confusion among contemporary Christians about the Spirit's ministry, it may be helpful at this point to consider the exact nature of His work on our behalf. Writing to the heresy-prone Corinthians, Paul explores this question in 2nd Corinthians, chapter three.

Reflecting the Glory of God:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves to you again? We don't need letters of recommendation to you or from you as some do, do we? *You* are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, read and understood by everyone, that everyone might know that you are Christ's letter, ministered to by us, not inscribed with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not written on tablets of stone, but on the living tablets of your hearts.

2nd Corinthians 3:1-3

Paul begins by criticizing the Corinthian church's use of the secular practice, common in the Roman empire, of writing "letters of recommendation". If you wanted a government job in Ancient Rome (and the imperial administration of the empire encompassed a much larger percentage of the truly "good" jobs than is true in our country today), good "letters" were essential. The Corinthians were apparently being tricked by a parade of traveling charlatans who carried such letters (genuine or false) from other Christian communities and leaders. Things had degenerated to the point where the Corinthians were more impressed with these relatively unknown "dinner-circuit speakers" than with the true apostles, simply because of their "good credentials". No doubt they were good speakers too, with polished lines, and titillating rhetorical flourishes which kept the Corinthians entertained. This was not an unusual thing in Peter and Paul's day and age. Circuit speakers like Lucian made a comfortable living, lecturing in rhetoric and philosophy, and were considered some of the best entertainment available. But Paul is exasperated by the Corinthians' attitude, and rightly so. For they have put *more* stock in *man's* approval (as represented by the letters of recommendation) than in *God's* approval!

The whole reason that we Christians are left on earth to continue our temporal lives after salvation is for the purpose of glorifying God. Now how do we go about accomplishing this lofty task? The Corinthians have the impression that if "important people" say that you are glorifying God, then you really are doing just that. According to their erroneous view, to glorify God we should not shrink from any "human" means available. We should, therefore, seek the approval of men, call attention to ourselves, and energetically engage in activities of which the world approves. Paul, on the other hand, tells them straight out that they are wrong. He says that he, for one, does not *need* "human" marks of success (the letters of recommendation). Paul has *divine* validation provided by the Corinthians themselves, for *they* are his letters, giving proof of his ministry. Paul's "letters" are not written with material things like pen and ink, or on perishable paper, but are written by the Holy Spirit on the hearts of his readers. Do you see the point Paul is making? The real power for living a good Christian life comes from God (through His Holy Spirit), not from human effort, and the real mark of a Christian's success is not to be found in human praise, but true spiritual results.

Paul could have cajoled the Corinthians into giving him some marvelous letters of recommendation. Paul could have trumpeted his own ministry, called attention to himself, hired a public relations staff, etc. But Paul knew that God's way was to "advertise" only through the *lives* of the Corinthians themselves. Their lives were the only legitimate letters of recommendation, demonstrating the effect of the apostle's ministry. People were to look at this band of followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, look at their spiritual growth and service, and conclude "truly, this must be the work of God we see". How do we glorify God? We let Him glorify Himself *through* us. If we continue to follow Him, continue to grow spiritually, continue to bear up under the testing He sends our way, and meet the challenge of personal ministry, then His power, His love, His glory will indeed be reflected in our lives. Paul's words here do *not* mean that we should seek to glorify God by vociferously making an issue of our Christianity. Paul is not telling the Corinthians to print up bumper stickers with "this ox-cart is bound for heaven" on them. It is not merely by saying "I am a Christian" that God's glory is reflected. No, we can only fully reflect His glory by *living* like Christians so that others will say "this must be the power of God we see".

The Advantage of the Holy Spirit:

That is how much confidence we have toward God through Jesus Christ. Not that we are so capable on our own account that we can claim to have accomplished all this by ourselves, rather, our capability comes from God, who has made us capable ministers of a new covenant - not the one of the letter (i.e. the Law), but one of the Spirit. That is because the letter (i.e. the Law) puts us to death, but the Spirit brings us to life.

2nd Corinthians 3:4-6

In verses four through six, Paul makes the additional point that this confidence he feels does not stem from his own power, but from God. Paul tells us that he is not self-sufficient, but that God is all-sufficient to empower his ministry. The same is true of every aspect of our Christian lives as well. As God empowered Paul to serve Him, so He empowers us to do everything He asks of

us. The immediate source of that power is the Holy Spirit. In the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit, we Christians have something unique that believers of Old Testament times did not have. Paul emphasizes this by saying in verse six that we are ministers of a new covenant which is "not characterized by the letter, but by the Spirit", and that "the letter (i.e. the law) kills, but the Spirit gives life". What Paul means by this is that under the Mosaic law of Israel (as set out in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament) God's word looked forward to Christ who had not yet died for us, emphasizing our sinfulness and need for a Savior, while under the new covenant (the historical person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ) God's word emphasizes our salvation in Him, wrought by the Holy Spirit, and our new lives in Him, empowered by the Holy Spirit (Jn.7:39). In the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit, we Christians have a tremendous advantage. Paul tells us here that without the Holy Spirit, he would not have "what it takes" to do the ministry he is in fact doing, but that with the Holy Spirit, he is "made able" to accomplish it.

The Surpassing Glory of the Holy Spirit's Ministry

Now if the [Law's] ministry of death - engraved with letters written on stone - imparted glory of a type such that the Israelites were not allowed to keep continually beholding Moses' face (because this glory of his face was fading), then how could the Spirit's ministry of life **not** impart glory? For if the [Law's] ministry of condemnation possessed glory, then so much the more should the ministry of justification surpass it in glory. In fact, the glory of the former seems altogether lacking in glory in comparison to the surpassing glory of the latter. For if what fades away has glory, then so much the more is it true that what abides (i.e. the ministry of the Spirit to believers) is glorious.

2nd Corinthians 3:7-11

In comparison with the glory of the new ministry of the Holy Spirit to all believers, the glory manifested under the Old Covenant is said to be negligible (v.10). What does this mean? "Glory" is the translation of the Greek *doxa* which means "brightness, brilliance", but also "reputation, fame". To glorify God is to somehow make known or visible the incredible luminescence of His Person and His work. In the Old Testament example cited by Paul, God gave the world a small glimpse of that brilliance by making Moses' face shine. Moses had spent forty days with the Lord receiving the Law, and a bit of His glory had "rubbed off", so to speak, on Moses. This glory was fading, and Moses covered his face so that the Israelites would not see its end. The glorification of God provided by the Holy Spirit, however, is enduring. It is a brilliant light burning on the inside of every Christian, and manifesting God's glory on the outside. According to Paul, this new glory surpasses the miracles of the Old Testament in magnitude. The faith, and hope, and love that flows from us through the Holy Spirit, is a brighter star than any overt miracle could ever be.

Mirrors of God:

(12) Since we have such a confident expectation of success [based on the support from the Spirit's ministry], we speak the truth unreservedly – (13) and not like the previous

situation where Moses had to put a veil over his face so that the Israelites couldn't see that temporary glory fading out; (14) now their hearts became hard, and until today at the reading of the Old Covenant there is still a [similar sort of] veil remaining in place [one which hides the true glory]; and [this "veil" which obscures the truth] is not being taken off because only in Christ is it done away with; (15) so until this present day, whenever Moses is read, this veil [of sorts] lies over their hearts, (16) but whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is removed (17) – for the Lord and the Spirit are one, and wherever the Lord's Spirit is, there is also freedom (i.e. the opportunity and power to do God's will). (18) And everyone of us, when we reflect [like a mirror] the Lord's glory with no "veil" obscuring our faces (i.e., with unsullied Christian witness), is being transformed **into the same image** (i.e., become more Christ-like) so as to reflect an ever greater degree of glory – exactly what is to be expected with the Lord's Spirit as the agent of our transformation.
2nd Corinthians 3:12-18

In the passage above, as a result of the Holy Spirit's ministry to him, Paul has "confidence" (Greek *elpis* meaning "positive hope"), and is thus encouraged to push forward with his ministry (v.12). Under the Old Covenant, Moses had to put a veil on his face (v.13), but we have a far different mandate today (v.18: the *apodosis*, or conclusion, to v.13). We are commanded to reflect God's glory ("reflecting the glory of the Lord"; note: many translations mistranslate the Greek participle *katoptrizomenoi* as "beholding", but it really means "reflecting" in the middle voice as translated here). Now the brilliant light from Moses' face was literal light (the first meaning of *doxa* as treated above), while the glory we are told to reflect is the very person of God (the second meaning of *doxa* as treated above, namely, the fame and reputation of God Himself). How can we possibly reflect God's awesome person, His ineffable love and His immaculate truth? Paul tells us that we are to accomplish this task by "being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Spirit of the Lord". The "same image" is the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. By nature we are not at all like Christ, but as our name "Christian" (literally, "little Christs") implies, we are to strive to become more like our Master day by day. If we do make this effort, the result is "an ever increasing reflection of glory" (the meaning of the idiom *apo doxes eis doxan* translated "from glory to glory"), and those who see us grow in grace will have to conclude (as does the end of verse 18) that the cause of this miraculous transformation must be "from the Spirit of the Lord". To genuinely reflect God's glory, we must do it His way. The true power source for transformation must be the Holy Spirit, not our own human energy. The more we seek to intrude ourselves into the picture, the more others will see only *our own* faces when they look into the "mirror" of our lives, instead of the clear reflection of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.

Conclusion:

(1) *How do we do things God's way?* First of all, we don't do them man's way. People can easily see through phony "happy-talk". Merely adding Christian-sounding phrases mechanically to every sentence, or making an outward show of "being Christian" without any of the inner dynamics is a waste of time at best. In its broad outlines, the Christian way of life is fairly simple. Believe in Christ, and you are saved. What follows next, however, is a lifelong pursuit

of holiness: spiritual growth requires the consistent learning, believing, and applying of divine truth. Then, as we grow spiritually, God gives us opportunities to face testing, and to minister to others (according to our various gifts). If we are on this road, we will inevitably reflect God's grace and love to an ever increasing degree, and thus fulfill the mandates of 2nd Corinthians chapter three.

(2) *How does the ministry of the Holy Spirit work?* First of all, we must never forget the words of the Lord to Zerubbabel in Zechariah 4:6: "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit." We are the instruments only. God has given us very precise marching orders. We simply carry them out, as good servants should, and the Holy Spirit provides the power, the growth, the results. When Elijah fled to mount Horeb in panic, the Lord sought to teach him this same lesson by bringing, in quick succession, past the cave where Elijah hid a terribly powerful wind, then an earthquake, and finally a fire. But the Lord was not in any of these phenomena, despite their visible power. Then the Lord brought a "small whispering voice", and this voice *did* contain the power and presence of God. The whisper of the Holy Spirit to our hearts, encouraging us, guiding us, comforting us, is far more powerful than any visible miracles. If we do in fact walk with God, confessing our sins and moving forward spiritually, *then His Spirit will help us*. The ministry of the Spirit may not be visible to us, but its effects will be obvious. In short, if we are pressing forward, we *do* have the help of the Holy Spirit. The fact that we cannot quantify His ministry, or see it, or feel it in the same way that we feel heat and cold, does not make it any less real or vital. This is an important point because many Christians today are involved in questionable, even heretical practices because of their desire to "feel and experience" something tangible. We only need to try, and the Spirit will help us follow where He leads.

(3) *How does all this relate to our treatment of suffering?* If we do reach out to the Lord in trust, His Holy Spirit (whom He has given to us as a comforter and helper) will indeed help us to endure whatever trials we must navigate. If we really do believe that God is our shepherd, that he watches over us and is greatly concerned for us, why do we complain, why do we faint in our faith? We complain because we hurt and because we are human. The Psalms of David are filled with David's plaintive cries to the Lord, but David did not faint in his faith. In the midst of his pain, he trusted God. He shed his tears to the Lord in confidence that the Lord would deliver him in His great grace and mercy. Our advantage as Christians is to have such faith, such confidence, in a loving Father who will help us. If we will but take this step of faith in times of trouble, His Holy Spirit will help and comfort us too.