

THE HEAVENLY GIFT

PREFACE

The following three studies were originally printed separately between November 1981 and August 1982:

- ◆ The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand
- ◆ The Heavenly Gift
- ◆ They that are Heavenly

For greater clarity, they have been revised slightly from the form in which they were first printed.

Although originally printed separately, all three articles were consciously prepared as a connected whole, with the intention of bringing them all together in the present form. Each lays a foundation for its successor, coming to a climax in “They that are heavenly”.

My intention is to try and unveil something of the rare jewel of the Holy Spirit’s ministry in and through the “Church of the firstborn”. I very much hope that these studies are not seen merely as interesting thoughts, but as very powerful and fruitful revelations of the glory of that hope to which we have been called.

John L Birkin

March 2014

© **Copyright 2014 John L Birkin**

1

The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand

THE common burden of the preaching of John, Jesus and the disciples was: “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,” (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 10:7).

Is this theme relevant to the Church of today, or did it apply only to the Jews during Christ’s earthly ministry? To answer, let us first consider what this expression means.

The Kingdom of God is not limited to any one particular geographical location. It means primarily a place in which the Will of God prevails.

The Kingdom of God is frequently described as the Kingdom of Heaven, because heaven is currently the only place where God’s rule holds full sway. So, when Jesus taught His disciples to pray “*Thy Kingdom come,*” the consequences of its coming were described in the words that followed: “*Thy Will be done, in earth, as it is in heaven.*”

The Kingdom in the Ministry of Christ

When Jesus proclaimed the nearness of the Kingdom of Heaven, He was partly referring to the Jewish hope of the overthrow of every rule and dominion, and the visible establishment on earth of the Kingdom in all its glory.

But He not only meant that the establishment of the Kingdom on earth was potentially at hand. He also meant that all the powers and attributes of the promised Kingdom were actually present among them, even though its full manifestation was yet future.

These powers were embodied in Christ Himself. He was the Kingdom incarnate. This is why, when asked by the Pharisees “*when the Kingdom of God should come,*” Jesus said, “*The Kingdom of God is within you.*” (Luke 17:20,21). Since the Kingdom was certainly not *within* the Pharisees, I prefer the Authorised Version marginal reading “*among you.*” Standing there, in the very midst of them, was the physical embodiment of the power and attributes of the Kingdom.

So, wherever He went, Jesus carried the Kingdom with Him. The implication is glorious. Since heaven is the only place where the powers of the Kingdom are fully operative, Jesus revealed on earth the powers and atmosphere of heaven.

For example, in Matthew 12:28 Jesus said, “*If I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God is come unto you.*” Where God reigns supreme, no demonic power can exercise dominion. It may be that the kingdoms of this world have not yet become the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ (Revelation 11:15). But where Jesus is, at that particular moment and in that particular location, the powers of the future Kingdom are already in present operation.

This explains Jesus' words at the death of Lazarus. When Martha said: "*I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day,*" Jesus replied: "*I am the resurrection.*" (John 11:24-25). Where Jesus is, the powers that will be in operation at the last day are already among us now, in the present. There is no need to await a future resurrection when the Resurrection Himself is come.

The Kingdom in the Ministry of the disciples

Not only did Jesus, the Kingdom incarnate, bring heaven down to His hearers. He empowered His disciples to do likewise. Like their Master, they did not simply *proclaim* the near approach of the establishment of God's rule on earth. They actually carried it with them and *demonstrated* the powers that govern that Kingdom.

Let us illustrate. Their commission was to "*heal the sick ...and say... the kingdom of God is come nigh unto you*" (Luke 10:9). Sickness cannot exist in the final establishment of God's Kingdom. Since the disciples were endued with "*the powers of the world to come*" (Hebrews 6:5), sickness was subdued in their presence.

When they departed, they too could make the remarkable claim not merely to have preached of the coming Kingdom, but also to have *brought it nigh*. They brought into the present, the powers of the future.

In the Kingdom, not only are demons and sickness destroyed. There is also a reproduction of the present atmosphere of heaven. So, where the Lord's Anointed reigns, a living peace prevails, subduing all that would trouble or disturb. "*Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end*" (Isaiah 9:7).

Since the disciples carried the powers of the Kingdom with them, they could impart the peace of the Kingdom as well as exercise its healing and exorcising power. "*If the house be worthy let your peace come upon it*" (Matthew 10:13). They carried peace with them as their own possession, the very peace of heaven come down to earth.

The Kingdom in the Ministry of the Church

This beautiful ministry of bearing and imparting the powers of heaven was not restricted to the period of Jesus' earthly ministry. The Kingdom was still preached after the day of Pentecost (Acts 8:12; 28:31). This includes far more than teaching a future inheritance in the Kingdom (James 2:5). Our translation into the Kingdom of God's Son (Colossians 1:13) is a present experience as well as having a future consummation.

John not only shared with his fellow-believers in the tribulation and patience of Jesus Christ. He also tasted the Kingdom with them (Revelation 1:9). The Kingdom was not relegated to the future leaving us with only the patience and tribulation in the present!

It is the Church's blessed privilege both to *taste* for herself "*the powers of the world to come*" and to *manifest* them to others. Like Jesus and the disciples, she too is to bring the Kingdom of Heaven within reach.

Paul's personal experience of the energy of the world to come is clearly seen in his

words: *“the Kingdom of God is not in word, but in power.”* (1 Corinthians 4:20). A further example is found in Romans 14:7: *“The Kingdom of God is ... righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.”* The righteousness, peace and joy that attended his preaching were far more than simply rich blessings that accompany salvation. They were nothing less than foretastes of that glorious Kingdom which will one day bring down heaven over all the earth. Just like the disciples, the Church too can impart the very peace which heaven itself already enjoys.

The foregoing helps to throw into sharp relief the breathtaking ministry and privileges of the Church. She is called upon both to taste and to reveal tomorrow's world today. She is God's present demonstration of His future Kingdom.

To reveal adequately the powers of the heavenly world to come, however, she must first drink deeply of the heavenly gift (Hebrews 6:4).

2

The Heavenly Gift

ONE of the terms to describe the Holy Spirit is “*the heavenly gift*” (Hebrews 6:4).

At first sight, this just seems another way of saying, “*the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven*” (1 Peter 1:12).

Now even if this were all that was implied, it would be glorious indeed. How refreshing is every restored contact between heaven and earth. Light and hope fill our eyes at the mention of “*power from on high*” (Luke 24:49) or “*a sound from heaven*” (Acts 2:2).

But the implications of this beautiful term are far richer. According to Vincent, the word “*heavenly*” emphasises not so much the *origin* of the gift as its *quality*. In other words, not *where* the Spirit came from but *what* He is. So, not only is the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, He is also heaven sent down. Where the Spirit is, the earnest of heaven is.

Heaven brought nigh

Before Pentecost, Jesus and the disciples brought the kingdom of heaven down to their hearers. As Jesus made clear, the Agent of this beautiful ministry was the Holy Ghost: “*If I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you.*” (Matthew 12:28). By the Spirit, the powers of the future, and of the worldwide rule of heaven on earth, were already in operation.

This explains the cry of the demons to Jesus: “*Art thou come to torment us **before the time?***” (Matthew 8:29). They already knew that there was a certain future torment. But when Jesus came in the power of the Spirit, the future was already standing there among them in the present before the time. The demons were experiencing a present taste of the powers of their ultimate future doom. Similarly Jesus’ presence at the tomb of Lazarus brought into the present the resurrection life that would be in operation on the last day.

Let us now consider more fully the Church’s awesome potential in this realm.

Heaven outpoured

The preconditions for the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost provide a vital key to understanding the purpose and effect of His coming.

Explaining the events of that day, Peter said: “***Therefore** being by the right hand of God **exalted**... He hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear*” (Acts 2:33). This recalls John’s words: “*The Holy Ghost was not yet given **because** that Jesus was not yet **glorified***” (John 7:39).

The need for Jesus to be exalted and glorified before the Spirit could be outpoured is

highly significant. It means that the Holy Ghost was ministered by an enthroned and reigning Christ invested with the full authority of the Kingdom.

Furthermore, the Scriptures teach that the Holy Ghost would bring that Kingdom with Him.

When Jesus uttered the well-known words: "*Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you*" (Acts 1:8), the context is very illuminating. After His resurrection, Jesus had spoken much to the apostles of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). It was thus natural for them to enquire just before His ascension: "*Lord wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?*" (Acts 1:6). Why did Jesus' reply refer to the coming of the Holy Ghost? It was not a change of subject. Yes, the apostles would have to await God's time for the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. But, in the meantime, they were to receive now the powers of that future kingdom, to which the Lord had been directing their thoughts, in the form of the Holy Ghost. Though its ultimate manifestation was yet future, through the Spirit they were to be empowered to demonstrate the Kingdom over all the earth in the present.

This explains Peter's quotation on the day of Pentecost: "*And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh*" (Acts 2:17).

The "last days" is an Old Testament term referring to that age when the Lord would set up His worldwide rule, subduing to Himself all authority (cp Isaiah 2:2-4). Yet, clearly, the outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2 was not the final establishment of that age. Why then did Peter refer to Joel's prophecy to explain the events of that day? Because where the Spirit is in operation, the powers of the future last days are already present. The outpoured Holy Ghost is the foretaste and firstfruits of the last days.

Now the only place where the kingdom is at present fully manifest is heaven. Since the coming of the Holy Ghost means that the powers of the last days and of the kingdom are among us, then the outpoured Spirit is in effect an outpoured heaven.

Having considered the implications of the initial outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, let us look at the ongoing outworkings of the outpoured Spirit in and through the Church.

Heaven tasted

In 1 Corinthians 2:12 it says: "*We have received... the Spirit ... that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God*". This knowledge is not a mere mental **understanding**. According to Hebrews 6:4-5, those who are "*made partakers of the Holy Ghost*" actually **taste** both "*the heavenly gift*" and "*the powers of the world to come.*"

The beautiful thing about the ministry of the Spirit is that He does not just bring to earth *the authority of heaven*; He brings *heaven itself* within the Christian's present experience.

This is clearly shown in Ephesians 1:3: "*Blessed be. . . God. ..who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.*"

- Why “*spiritual*” blessings? Not to distinguish them from bodily or material ones, but because they are Spirit-given.
- Why “*blessings in heavenly places*”? One paraphrase significantly says, “*blessings that heaven itself enjoys*.” The Spirit brings down to man nothing less than the very blessings already found now in heaven.

Let us now see how the Spirit is the foretaste of our inheritance in the heavenly Kingdom.

Ephesians 1:13,14 speaks of our sealing “*with that Holy Spirit of promise which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession*.” The word “*earnest*” has two distinct meanings in the original:

- a down-payment, pledge or guarantee and
- a foretaste.

Here is a very beautiful truth. Not only is the Spirit as a pledge of a future redemption, He is Himself a present foretaste of that future inheritance. This is not just a question of a legal right to our inheritance, but of actually tasting it before its full possession.

In another example Paul writes: “*We do groan... that mortality might be swallowed up of life. Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit*” (2 Corinthians 5:4.5). The Holy Ghost is not merely as a guarantee of a future life that will swallow up death. He is Himself an actual advance taste of that life.

The same truth is seen in Romans 8:23: “*Ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body*.” The firstfruits are an advance taste of a future full harvest. To possess the Spirit, therefore, is nothing less than to taste the firstfruits of our future adoption. One commentator captures well the essence of this phrase: “Even though we have so much of heaven already within.” Cynics speak of heaven as “a pie in the sky when you die.” Through the Holy Ghost we may partake of that pie before we die!

Heaven reproduced

To taste of heaven would seem to be glory enough. But there is something more glorious still. We have seen already how the Spirit is the firstfruits of heaven. Yet it is possible to experience the communion of the Spirit to such a degree that we ourselves are “*a kind of firstfruits of his creatures*” (James 1:18).

As the Spirit is the foreview and foretaste of God’s future world, so the Spirit-filled Church is herself a reflection of the same.

She is the firstfruits of God’s new creation, to demonstrate what this creation will be like. Filled with the heavenly gift, she reveals on earth the heavenly kingdom:

- ◆ Our being made new in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) foreshadows the day when God will make all things new (Revelation 21:5).

- ◆ Our regeneration by the Holy Ghost foreshadows the grand future Regeneration (Matthew 19:28).
- ◆ Our new birth foreshadows the birth pangs of the new heaven and the new earth (Matthew 24:8, Greek).

The Spirit-filled Church is thus God's demonstration to the world of His coming kingdom. She not merely *proclaims* the kingdom, she *displays* it. She not only enjoys the foretaste of the reign of heaven on earth, she is herself a present-day demonstration of tomorrow's world.

How rare a jewel, then, we possess in "*the heavenly gift*." "Through this gift of the outpoured heaven, we not only *taste* of heaven, but we also *reproduce* and *prefigure* it.

No wonder Christians are described as "*those that are heavenly*" (1 Corinthians 15:48). This is far more than simply being heavenly-minded. The Church is a heavenly being whose ways are the ways of another world.

How true are the words of the hymn writer: *Life immortal, heaven descending, Lo! my heart the Spirit's shrine!*

Oh, Church! Partake to the full of your blood-bought birthright, "*the heavenly gift*".

3

They that are Heavenly

DISAGREEMENT is frequently heard over whether greater emphasis should be laid on the gifts or the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Some feel the primary emphasis should be on developing Christian character, looking down on the quest for the gifts as a sign of shallowness and spiritual immaturity. Others stress the dynamic, supernatural operations of the Holy Spirit, considering the ungifted as failing to fully experience the power of godliness.

At times this conflict is such that we are made to feel we must choose *either* the gifts or the fruit. Yet the Bible teaches us to covet *both* gifts and fruit: "*Follow after charity and desire spiritual gifts*" (1 Corinthians 14:1).

A misconception

To my mind, this conflict is rooted in a fundamental, far-reaching misconception: a failure adequately to appreciate that the fruit of the Spirit is no less supernatural than the gifts.

According to James 1:17: "*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights*". We know well that the supernatural empowering of the Holy Ghost is not from earth but "*from on high*" (Luke 24:49). It is less well appreciated, however, that Christian character is equally out-of-this-world.

So, to the extent that a believer is filled with the Holy Ghost he will not merely manifest "*the powers of the world to come*" he will himself be a heavenly being.

Born from above

The Bible says, "*our citizenship is in heaven*" (Philippians 3:20, RV). This implies far more than simply a legal right of access to heaven. Many hold United Kingdom passports who neither think like Britishers, look like Britishers nor even speak our language. Yet they have the legal rights of British citizens.

Citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, however, not only possess the legal rights of heaven; they bear the marks of heaven.

According to 1 Corinthians 15:48, "*as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly*". One paraphrase captures well the heart of this verse, rendering it: "the nature of the man from heaven is repeated in those who are of heaven". We shall not only "*bear the image of the heavenly*" (1 Corinthians 15:49) in the sense of being clothed upon with a spiritual body of glory. That outer glory is but a reflection of the inner glory of the divine nature reproduced within the believer.

In a nutshell, we are not merely endued, or clothed, with “*power from on high* “. Our very birth is “*from above*” (John 3:3, AV Margin).

Through the outpoured Holy Ghost, heaven was shed abroad at Pentecost, enabling Christians to taste for themselves the powers of the Kingdom of heaven. We are not only to taste of heaven, however, we are to reproduce and to prefigure it.

The fruit of the Spirit is nothing less than the nature of heaven reproduced in flesh. Christian character is not a mere upright, moral ethic. It is as much a revelation of “*the powers of the world to come*” as are “*signs and wonders and... divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Ghost*”(Hebrews 2:4). It is the wholly supernatural product of another world. It is, quite literally, “out of this world.”

So then, the purpose of the heavenly gift, the Holy Ghost, is both to *reveal* and to *reproduce* heaven. To illustrate let us consider certain specific aspects of character.

A Glorified Joy

The Holy Ghost is frequently shown as the source of the-Christian’s joy (e.g. Acts 13:52; Romans 15:13; 1 Thessalonians 1:6).

This joy is nothing less than the very joy of the heavenly kingdom: “*the Kingdom of God is joy in the Holy Ghost*” (Romans 14:17). I cannot adequately emphasise that such a joy is wholly beyond this world. To taste it is actually to taste the very joy of Heaven, “*a joy unspeakable and full of glory*” (1 Peter 1:8). This latter expression literally means a “glorified joy”. When the Spirit of glory rests upon a believer (1 Peter 4:14), he experiences a present foretaste of the very joy he will know after his future glorification. This is why one paraphrase speaks of a “joy that comes from heaven itself”. Once again I cannot adequately stress how literal this is. Joy in the Holy Ghost is the very joy of heaven itself. God does not merely give joy; He gives *His own* joy. (Compare Jesus’ promise and prayer in John 15:11; & 17:13.)

The Peace of the Kingdom

As our joy, so also our peace. It is the very self-same peace already pervading the heavenly Kingdom: “*the Kingdom of God is...peace... in the Holy Ghost*” (Romans 14:17). It is no less in quality than the peace we shall experience in heaven.

This is why the disciples were instructed to let their peace come upon the homes they entered. It was part of their ministry of bringing nigh the Kingdom of God. They actually imparted the peace already present in heaven.

This peace is not merely *from* God. It is the very peace *of* God (Philippians 4:7; cp John 14:27; 16:33). It may reign within us now (Colossians 3:15), even before the Prince of Peace establishes His Heavenly Kingdom over all the world.

Once again, the Holy Ghost is the means of imparting this further fragment of heaven: “*to be spiritually minded* (AV Marg, “the minding of the Spirit”) *is peace.*” (Romans 8:6).

Love from another world

Another indication that Christian character is heavenly rather than simply the product of sincere human endeavour is found in Romans 5:5: *“the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost”*. This means literally that love is *poured* out upon us, just as though the very windows and doors of heaven had been thrown open.

This love is not merely a love given *by* God. It is the very love *of* God poured into flesh. When John exclaimed, *“what manner of love”* (1 John 3:1), the original sense is “from what country, tribe or race does this type of love come?” We could scour the earth but not find its like. The love poured into us is foreign to this world.

To know this love we must drink deeply of the heavenly gift. This is why Paul speaks of *“the love of the Spirit”* (Romans 15:30; cp Colossians 1:8; 2 Timothy 1:7). The Holy Ghost is the impartor of both the powers and the character of the heavenly world.

Wisdom from above

Although not listed among the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians, wisdom is an oft-mentioned attribute of Christian character.

Like all other attributes, this too is supernatural. It is not simply the accumulated experience of years. James 3:17 speaks of a wisdom which, quite literally, comes down from above.

As we may expect from the previous illustrations, the source of this heavenly wisdom is the Holy Ghost. This is seen in the frequent occasions when wisdom and the Holy Ghost are linked (e.g. Exodus 3 1:1; Deuteronomy 34:9; Isaiah 11:2; Acts 6:3,10).

Conclusion

Through the Holy Ghost the powers of the Kingdom of Heaven are brought into the affairs of men. The Spirit brings *to* us the atmosphere of heaven so that we may actually experience its reality.

Even more beautiful is the Spirit’s ministry of reproducing that atmosphere *in* us.

The essence of the work of the Spirit is not so much to shower upon us power and gifts “from above”. It is to reproduce “above” within us. True Christian character is the revelation of the nature of heaven in flesh. The fruit of the Spirit is as supernatural and heavenly as the gifts of the Spirit. The heavenly gift was outpoured to beget a heavenly people who would bear the image of the heavenly Man.

This means far more than a superior level of uprightness and good citizenship. It is nothing less than the reproduction of a life beyond anything conceivable on this planet. Life from another world has invaded us. No earthly terms can adequately describe it. No wonder we read of:

- ◆ A love which passeth knowledge (Ephesians 3:19),
- ◆ A peace which passeth all understanding (Philippians 4:7), and

- ◆ A joy unspeakable (1 Peter 1:8).

We do not merely seek to *pattern* ourselves on the holiness of God; we *partake* of it (Cp Hebrews 12:10). We are made partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

This is "*the sanctification of the Spirit*" (2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2).

Through being "*made partakers of the Holy Ghost*", we become a heavenly race, enabled to reproduce the world to come in the sight of the inhabitants of the present planet earth. The Church is a supernatural creation whose true essence and being belong to another world. Her life-source is foreign to this planet and to its ways. In Christ, through the Spirit, the Church is a present-day manifestation of the new earth and of the Regeneration.

How rare a gem is the Heavenly Gift! How priceless a privilege to be a heavenly people!