

GOD'S SPIRITUAL BLESSINGS

Joel 2:28-32

In chapter 2:21-27 the prophet Joel has been describing the material blessings God is going to bestow on Israel. God's judgement is past and the people's repentance enables a period of God's blessing. Instead of the locusts devouring, the theme is now the people eating the abundance of God's provision. For an obedient people there is only the prospect of well-being as long as they remain close to the source of every blessing.

In our reading this morning the theme moves on from material blessing to spiritual blessing. It's a wonderful passage. Although it's a short passage, it's so full of meaning that I could talk about it all day – but don't worry I won't do that. This spiritual blessing begins with an outpouring of God's Spirit in prophecy in verses 28 and 29; continues with the cosmic signs which will herald the day of God's judgement in verses 30 and 31 and concludes with a promise of salvation for God's people in verse 32. Earlier it seemed as if there was no escape from the locusts, now escape is guaranteed.

Let's begin by looking at the outpouring of God's Spirit:

“28 ¶ "And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. 29 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” (Joel 2:28-29 NIV)

God's indwelling of His people would be revealed in a clearer way than rain and crops, through the charismatic flow of a divine spirit of prophecy throughout the whole community. In this way the promise of God's presence in verse 27 would be more abundantly fulfilled. Joel evidently lived in a time when prophecy was not much in evidence in Judah. In these OT times this was evidence of spiritual deprivation. For example the narrator in 1 Samuel 3:1 commented pityingly on a period when “the word of Yahweh was rarely given

visions were uncommon” In a NT context Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians that if the whole church engages in prophecy, a non- Christian visitor will say that “God is really among you” (1 Corinthians 14:24). The theme of Yahweh’s presence with which the previous section finished is taken up and amplified. The blessing of rain is now the greater blessing of God’s Spirit.

Verse 28 says that this blessing is for “all people”, although it’s clear from the context, especially the beginning of chapter 3, that Joel is talking about the entire community of Judah rather than the whole of mankind. So the gift of prophecy would become common in Judah and manifest itself in a new way. Certainly it’s clear that the apostle Peter understood this passage in that way when he preaches as recorded in Acts chapter 2:

“Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.” (Acts 2:14-22 NIV)

This promise is also similar to the prophecy of Ezekiel:

“I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the house of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD.” (Ezekiel 39:29 NIV)

As Micah says (Micah 3:8) the Spirit is the medium by which Yahweh reaches down to his prophet and gives impulse and authority to his oracles:

“But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin.” (Micah 3:8 NIV)

Joel’s words also echo the longings expressed by Moses in Numbers 11:29:

“..... I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” (Numbers 11:29 NIV)

It is the presence and action of the Holy Spirit which gives authority and truth to the dreams and visions of prophecy. Distinctions of sex and age were irrelevant as this outpouring was for all people. Even slaves, who might be of foreign origin, were included. Paul takes up the huge breadth of this blessing in chapter 3 of his letter to the Galatians:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28 NIV)

Let’s move on to look at the powerful signs which are to accompany the last day of the present age in verses 30 and 31:

“I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.” (Joel 2:30-31 NIV)

Here, I think Joel is making it quite clear, for example in 2:26 where Joel says that God’s people will never again be shamed, that these signs and wonders, whilst awesome indicators of the power of God and point to His judgement, are no threat to God’s people. They are very similar to the signs spoken of in Revelations chapter 6:

“I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red,” (Revelations 6:12 NIV). As I said the day of the Lord’s judgement is no threat to God’s people, but those who have

not turned to Christ and so been forgiven and made right with God should indeed fear God's great and terrible judgement.

Indeed, as well as the end times imagery which we just considered, we can also see imagery of the association of fire with baptism. John the Baptist said that Jesus would baptise with both the Holy Spirit and fire and we can also remember that on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit manifested himself and came upon the people in tongues of fire. Nevertheless in verses 30 and 31 I do believe that Joel is speaking of the end times and God's judgement rather than baptism with the Spirit.

The final verse of our reading gives us a wonderful comforting promise:

“And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors whom the LORD calls.” (Joel 2:32 NIV)

God's people have nothing to fear from God's judgement on the last day. To use the language of Zephaniah they will be “hidden on the day of Yahweh's wrath”. I believe we can see in this the theme of being cloaked in Christ's righteousness, so that God does not see our sinful selves, but rather the righteousness of Christ.

In Joel's thinking God dwells upon Mount Zion and so it is there and in Jerusalem that His people will be kept safe. Yahweh's home will be opened to His people. As is often the case with OT promises, this theme is taken up in the NT. Peter quotes this very passage from Joel when he is preaching as we've already heard this morning. The experience of the 120 who were the nucleus of the first Christian community was that they were all filled with the Holy Spirit as Christ had promised:

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” (Acts 2:4 NIV)

Peter's Pentecost sermon proceeds to relate these OT oracles to the mission of Jesus and he derives from this an invitation to those

present to join in the new Christian community. The name of Jesus Christ in which Peter's hearers are invited to be baptised, is an interpretation of the name of Yahweh. This interpretation is facilitated by the rendering of Yahweh as LORD in the Greek OT; here in Acts this interpretation is justified by the interpretation of two Psalms that God made this Jesus both Christ and LORD (Acts 2:25)

Paul interpreted the "all People" from our reading today to include Gentile believers as well as Jews. I think this is completely justified by Jesus's command that the gospel message was to be preached to the ends of the earth. We also see confirmation of this in Acts chapter 10 when the Gentile Cornelius and his household received an outpouring of the Spirit at their conversion. But, the extension of salvation to the Gentiles, is not a novel introduction of the NT, it was a part of OT teaching as well. Psalm 87 says that Gentiles will claim Zion as their place of birth, they will claim Israel and Israel's God as their own. Indeed the very purpose of the creation of Israel was to be a blessing for many nations (Genesis 12:1-3) where we are told that all peoples on earth will be blessed through Abram.

So what does this passage mean for us as Christians today? Firstly, I think we need to accept and rejoice in the wonderful promise of salvation in verse 32. Let's take that to heart and rest in it. All of us who have turned to Christ in faith and acknowledged him as our LORD and master who died for our sins will be welcomed into God's kingdom as his children. Secondly, I think this passage is certainly telling us that we need to receive an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We all receive the Spirit when first we turn to Christ in faith that he is the Christ the son of God who died in our place. However, I believe we can also receive subsequent outpourings of the Spirit to re-energise us and refresh us in our Christian lives. So this morning, on this day of Pentecost, I pray that all those here and indeed all members of our church community might receive a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit and that this will manifest itself by working in our lives, bringing about our sanctification and helping us and empowering us in our Christian service.