

Introduction: There is a tremendous comfort in realizing, even at our times of spiritual doubts and confusion, that God in Christ was at work drawing us into a saving relationship *long before* we had one thought towards God. What assurance to realize that it is *His* predestinating love and purpose which sent the Holy Spirit into our lives, to wake us up, open our eyes and enable us to eventually embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the Gospel!

Monday: Read Luke 3:21-22; Luke 9:29; Luke 9:37-43; Mark 9:25-29 & Luke 22:31-32. Christ is pictured consistently in the Gospels as anticipating sinners' needs and the Devil's every move. He wields the weapon of prayer in order to prepare to meet Satan in the wilderness for forty days of temptation (Luke 4:1-13). We see Him praying at His baptism in Luke 3:21. In the same manner, Jesus prepares to confront a terrible and mighty demon in a poor, nearly fatally possessed boy (Luke 9:37-43) by praying on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:29). When asked by his failing disciples why they were not able to drive this demon out when they had successfully driven out demons heretofore (Luke 9:1), Jesus alludes to *His own* prayerful vanquishing of Satan when He says, "This kind can come out only by prayer" (Mark 9:29).

Meditate and Pray: Aren't you glad that it is Christ's intercessions which pave the way for Satan's defeats? Just as He prayed for Simon Peter, and against the devil who was aiming to sift that Apostle like wheat (Luke 22:31-32) so He prayed for the demon-possessed boy and his father – even before He came down the mountain! Jesus Christ sees us in our struggles and *prays for us* from His position in glory before our troubles come.

Tues/Weds: Read Mark 9:14-24. It is never to be forgotten that faith comes to expression in our conversions and deliverances from harm only because the Spirit of Christ effectually applies to us the redemption wrought by our Savior. The Spirit must be sent, in answer to Jesus' prayers, before we take even one step in real, saving faith.

Though the father of the demon-possessed boy greatly struggled with doubt and fear that *his boy would never be made well*, He was nevertheless prompted by the Spirit of Christ (who was at work down among the masses all the while Jesus was in prayer on the Mount of Transfiguration) to bring his boy to Christ and Christ's disciples. When he discovered Christ was not there, he appealed to His disciples to help him and have mercy upon his son (Mark 9:17-19). After their failure, the father desperately appeals to Jesus directly – "Take pity on us" (Mark 9:22).

This is a powerful plea. I believe this is the only place where this powerful word for the *inward movement of compassion and pity* is used of one asking Jesus for help. Usually, this verb to do with "bowels of compassion" is reserved for descriptions of our Lord's internal movement of pity. But *here in Mark 9*, this is how deeply the father appeals to Christ – asking nothing less than that the Son of God would be moved with bowels of pity (and not just towards his son – but toward him and his son considered as one unit: "Have pity on us.") Such a deep appeal is authored, surely, by the "groans of the Holy Spirit, too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). Already, the Holy Spirit is at work in this father on behalf of his Son!

Meditate and Pray: Give thanks for Jesus' commitment to always respond to the work of the Holy Spirit in sin-tossed victims of sin and Satan. Though the father's faith is far from perfect, as he says in Mark 9:24, yet Christ promptly acts to exorcise the demon, knowing that the *source of this seed of faith in this man is the Spirit of God*. Although it is such a weak faith on the man's side, certainly not meriting a mighty deliverance, yet the Spirit's internal work of calling this man to God demands and receives Christ's respect and response!

Do you pause to thank the Spirit of God for every motion of His mighty presence in your breast – despite how imperfectly you cooperate with Him? Let us worship the Spirit for the indwelling work that He accomplishes,

giving thanks especially that the Father and Son always respond when He, the Spirit, brings a sinner in need of mercy and grace to the Throne of God's mercy seat!

Thursday: Read Isaiah 63:7-16 and Acts 10:34-38. The reason elect Israel of old knew with certainty that God was their Father (Isaiah 63:16) even if Abraham the father of Israel disowned them, was that His Spirit had always been at work among His people, grieving over Israel's sin (Isaiah 63:10); guiding them into rest in all their wanderings (Isaiah 63:14) and being present among them through the ministry of the prophet Moses (Isaiah 63:11).

Thus the Holy Spirit, though not poured out in all His fullness until the day of Pentecost, was nevertheless working among God's Old Testament people as Comforter, Lord and Giver of all spiritual life. So it is no surprise that, when Jesus came in answer to all the prayers and hopes of His Old Testament people, His ministry as the Messiah was especially described as a ministry "anointed" by the Spirit (Acts 10:38).

Meditate and Pray: Ask the Lord to renew your thankfulness for the work of the Spirit of Christ in your life. We are coming up soon to the season in which we celebrate Christ's Incarnation. Ask the Lord to make this season a time when His Spirit is singularly at work as well, as you sing # 201 in the red *Trinity Hymnal*:

1 O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie;
above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by:
yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting Light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.

2 For Christ is born of Mary;
and gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wond'ring love.
O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth!
And praises sing to God the King,
and peace to men on earth.

3 How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of his heav'n.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him still,
the dear Christ enters in.

4 O holy child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in;
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel.

Fri/Sat: Read Luke 4:14-27; 2 Kings 2:13-15 and John 16:8-11). Luke's Gospel makes much of the "power of the Holy Spirit" by which Christ embarked on His ministry in Galilee (Luke 4:14-15). As part of this Spirit-empowered ministry, Jesus taught the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth (Luke 4:16ff). Note Christ's stress here that He goes forth to preach, heal and deliver sinners because the Spirit of the Lord is on Him, because God has anointed Him with that Spirit. (Luke 4:18) Thus all Jesus' ministry as our Mediator and Savior is characterized as one overflowing with the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. On other prophets, priests and kings the Spirit came at different times and places, and with different measures. But on Christ the Spirit is poured without measure – overflowing in all His words and deeds (John 3:34 KJV).

Because of this Spirit's presence, His ministry in word and miracle is the fulfillment of all the Messianic promises of the Old Testament. This is why Jesus begins His sermon by quoting from the prophet Isaiah (chapter 61:1-2). *His work is the ministry of the Spirit of God in full demonstration of the Spirit's power.* Now we too can ask the question which Elisha asked in 2 Kings 2 "Where is the God of Elijah?", "Where is the Spirit of the prophets?" by declaring that all the power of the prophets now rests on our Savior.

Meditate and Pray: Give thanks that, because His Son has come down in the flesh, the Spirit of God has also come down. Because that Spirit works in our day as He worked in the days Jesus, we know that the whole world is open to the convicting work of the Spirit of God (John 16:8-11). Though we may be severely persecuted as our Savior was – the victory of Christ's Cross and Empty Tomb cannot be resisted by this tired, and wicked world. All the glory of this world is fading – but Christ's kingdom continues to grow and to go from one victory to another.

Sunday: Further reflection: But I can hear some of us objecting, saying, "I don't see much evidence in my life or in this sin-sick world of the Spirit's work. What needs is He meeting right now when this world cries out for justice and salvation in the midst of the huge problems it faces?" In answer, I love what the late David Powlison wrote about how we are to *assess* the work of the Spirit in our day and in our lives:

One prime effect of the Holy Spirit's inworking presence and power is the rewiring of our sense of felt needs. *Because the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, we keenly feel a different set of needs when God comes into view and when we understand that we stand or fall under His gaze. My instinctual cravings are replaced (sometimes quickly, always gradually), by the growing awareness of true, life-and-death needs.*

Do you get the picture? Rewiring a house is not a rewarding experience. No one stops to admire the work of rewiring as you pull wire through walls. Everyone loves the front façade of the house to be spiffed up and painted, but few appreciate what goes into new electrical circuits and safe plugs being installed in an old house. Just so with our lives – the work of the Holy Spirit is deep and hard work as He runs new electrical pathways in our lives. How does the Westminster Shorter Catechism put it, in describing the life-long work of the Spirit in the life of the Christian?

Q. 35. What is sanctification?

A. Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.

So we end this week of notes in prayer: "Lord, please persevere in the deep and difficult work of changing our sense of felt needs, so that we begin to value your mercy in our daily lives above all else and learn to rely more and more on your power to change our will and to enable our good works. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."