

OUT OF THE DEPTHS: GOD'S FORGIVENESS OF SIN

Study Six

THE HOLY SPIRIT CONVEYS THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN

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HOW DOES FORGIVENESS COME THROUGH TO US?

So far we have looked at the serious situation of our sin that God's forgiveness addresses, what it takes to deal with that, and the role and action of God in Jesus, particularly in his death and resurrection, to effect our forgiveness of sin.

We now begin to consider how that comes through to us. What happened in the cross and resurrection happened a long time ago. How does what was achieved there reach us now? We have seen that Jesus is alive now, and that we participate in his vindicated righteousness now and in the age to come, but how is that connection made between our glorified Lord in heaven and our lives here on earth?

We may be tempted to go straight to our response. God's forgiveness was secured in Jesus' death and resurrection, and we receive that by repenting and believing. We will need to consider the matter of our repentance and faith, but such a view of receiving forgiveness short-circuits and misrepresents the biblical witness. Great as God's forgiveness is, we cannot simply reach up and take it to ourselves just like that—if we ever wanted to. We have seen that we will never of our own accord seek forgiveness for ourselves in the first place—the willingness and desire to do so will have to be worked in us. Nor are we capable of appropriating to ourselves God's forgiveness, as if we had some controlling interest in the matter. It will come as a gift, and it must be brought to us.

Anyone who has bought or sold property will know that this cannot happen without a conveyancer. The vendor may be very willing to sell the property to the purchaser, and the purchaser may have made the decision to buy and be very willing to acquire the property, but it cannot happen just like that. Both parties are beholden to a conveyancer to clinch the deal. The conveyancer makes sure the price paid and the necessary documentation are deposited in the right places and the property is rightly transferred. Only then can the new owner be sure of possession, and the vendor be fully satisfied.

In a superficial reading of Scripture, with an activist mindset, we can miss the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in bringing God's forgiveness of sin through to us. Once

we see it, however, we marvel afresh at the great grace of God, and the magnificence of God's forgiveness is even more wondrously enhanced in our estimation.

Questions for Discussion:

- *What might be the dangers of thinking that God's forgiveness of sin happens automatically now by virtue of what God has done in Jesus?*
- *What might be the dangers of thinking that we can appropriate God's forgiveness to ourselves just by our own repentance and faith?*
- *What difference might it make to know God's forgiveness to be conveyed to us by the Holy Spirit?*

CREATOR SPIRIT

The Spirit of God was present and active in God's creation of all things:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light (Gen. 1:1–3, RSV).

The presence and power of the Spirit appears to be instrumental in the bringing into being of what God speaks by His word. What John the apostle said about the word of God—'without him was not anything made that was made' (John 1:3, RSV)—could be said equally of the agency of the Holy Spirit in creation:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath [Heb. *ruach*, meaning breath, wind or spirit] of his mouth (Ps. 33:6).

Though a different word is used, the Spirit is no less involved in the animation of human beings:

then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath [Heb. *neshamah*, meaning breath or spirit] of life; and the man became a living being (Gen. 2:7; compare Eccl. 11:5).

When this breath is taken away in a divine act of judgement (as in for example Gen. 6:3, 5; or Eccl. 12:7; 3:20–21) we die:

When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath [Heb. *ruach*], they die
and return to their dust (Ps. 104:29).

Once this has happened, it takes nothing less than a sending out of the Spirit of God to revive and restore the creation anew:

When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground (Ps. 104:30).

What the writer of Hebrews says of the Son and his word can be no less said of the Spirit of God: 'he sustains all things' (Heb. 1:3).

If the Spirit of God is active in the work of creating, sustaining and renewing all things, then the Spirit participates in God's active responsibility for bringing all things to the goal God has purposed for them.¹ We will see that the Spirit is closely associated with bringing through to us 'God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory' (1 Cor. 2:7):

'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him'—
these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:9–10).

This is the Spirit's particular area of expertise. Given what we have said about the connection between forgiveness and the life of righteousness in the age to come, this has implications for the Spirit's role of bringing us into the forgiven state.

Questions for Discussion:

- *What is the relationship of the Spirit to the creation and the purpose of God?*
- *What implications might this have for our experience of God's forgiveness?*

REDEEMER SPIRIT

Mention of the Spirit as the one by whom God recreates and renews the earth following God's death-dealing judgements highlights the Spirit's role in redemption.

At a time of rebellious and ungrateful complaining and weeping on the part of Israel in the wilderness, God brings judgement on them by giving them the meat they ask for, but in a way that will make it 'loathsome' to them, and that will issue in 'a very great plague' (see Num. 11; Ps. 106:13–15). In the midst of this, God gives to Moses and seventy of the elders of Israel at 'the tent of meeting' a remarkable experience of the Spirit of God. Why is this? Is it not so that they will be able 'to facilitate the people's access to the forgiveness that would be provided through the numerous sacrifices that would be offered in the wake of the plague',² and so bring them through to a place of hope (as in Num. 11:29—a time when God would put His Spirit on all His people)?

Once they were in the promised land, when the Israelites abandoned God to follow other deities, and God gave them over to incursions from their enemies, and the people called out to God, God raised up judges who delivered them. Often we are told that 'the spirit of the LORD came upon' the judge for the carrying out of this task (see for example Othniel, Judg. 3:10; Gideon, 6:34; Jephthah, 11:29; Samson, 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14). This continued as kings were appointed later (Saul, 1 Sam. 10:10–11; 11:6; David, 16:13; Ps. 51:11). The Spirit of God invariably came upon the prophets, both 'to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin' (Micah 3:8) and to announce the coming of God 'as Redeemer, to those . . . who turn from transgression' (Isa. 59:20–21). When the judgement of the exile came, God makes it clear that recovery, cleansing, 'a new heart', obedience and blessing would come by God putting His Spirit within them (see Ezek. 36:22–36), and even that the Spirit would bring about national resurrection (see Ezek. 37:1–14).

¹ See further: Geoffrey Bingham, *The Day of the Spirit*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1985, pp. 10–26.

² James Krieg, 'The Gift of the Spirit and Pastors', in *Shepherds after God's Own Heart*, Ministry School 2010, NCPI, Blackwood, 2010, pp. 10.1–10.2.

Isaiah summarised Israel's history as follows:

I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD,
the praiseworthy acts of the LORD,
because of all that the LORD has done for us . . .
In all their distress, he was distressed;
the angel of his presence saved them;³
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

But they rebelled
and grieved his holy spirit;
therefore he became their enemy;
he himself fought against them.
Then they remembered the days of old,
of Moses his servant.
Where is the one who brought them up out of the sea
with the shepherds of his flock?
Where is the one who put within them
his holy spirit,
who caused his glorious arm
to march at the right hand of Moses,
who divided the waters before them
to make for himself an everlasting name,
who led them through the depths?
Like a horse in the desert,
they did not stumble.
Like cattle that go down into the valley,
the spirit of the LORD gave them rest (Isa. 63:7, 9–14).

Here clearly 'the spirit of the LORD' is present and active in all times of deliverance and redemption. This tells us that the Spirit is well positioned to be the one who brings through to God's people the forgiveness of sins.

Questions for Discussion:

- *What is the relationship of the Spirit to God's mighty acts of deliverance?*
- *What implications might this have for our experience of God's forgiveness?*

SPIRIT OF JESUS

This is even more the case when the promised Messiah is in view:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD (Isa. 11:1–3).

³ NRSV footnote.

It goes on to say that this one on whom the Spirit rests will establish righteousness, and bring renewal and peace to the whole of creation (see Isa. 11:3–10). Similarly, this one will have the Spirit upon him to bring freedom and restoration:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations (Isa. 61:1–4).

This is the scripture that Jesus said was fulfilled in the hearing of those to whom he spoke (see Luke 4:14–21). This anointing of the Spirit, then, characterised the whole of Jesus' ministry.

When we examine the person, life and work of Jesus, we find that the Spirit is present and active at every point. His very conception was 'from the Holy Spirit', such that he was the one who would 'save his people from their sins' (Matt. 1:21). At the time of Jesus' baptism, John the baptiser declared: 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29). He went on to say:

I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (John 1:32–33).

Once again, the action of the Spirit is juxtaposed with the taking away of sin. It was Jesus, 'full of the Holy Spirit' and 'led by the Spirit' (Luke 4:1) who was able to resist the devil's temptations, in readiness for the work for which he was 'revealed': 'to take away sins' and so 'to destroy the works of the devil' (1 John 3:4, 8). Similarly, it was 'by the Spirit of God' that Jesus 'cast out demons' (Matt. 12:28), and it was as he 'rejoiced in the Holy Spirit' that Jesus prayed concerning the Father's 'gracious will' (Luke 10:21).

In particular, the Spirit was at work in the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus:

Christ . . . through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God (Heb. 9:14).

Christ was able to step down into death as its conqueror by being 'made alive in the spirit' (1 Pet. 3:18). He was 'vindicated by the Spirit'⁴ (1 Tim. 3:16) and 'was declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit'⁵ of holiness by resurrection from the dead' (Rom.

⁴ NRSV footnote.

⁵ NRSV footnote.

1:4). Thus it was by the working of God's 'great power' that He 'raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places' (Eph. 1:20).

Because the Holy Spirit himself was intimately engaged in the whole work of God's salvation of us in Christ, and knows it from the inside, none is better qualified than the Spirit to convey to us, and to take us into, the reality and eternal benefits of God's great forgiveness of sin.⁶ He is uniquely positioned for this most intimate and personal of functions.

Questions for Discussion:

- *What encouragement is it to us that the Spirit knows God's whole salvation of us in Christ from the inside?*
- *What might happen if that same Spirit came to dwell in us?*

THE INDWELLING SPIRIT

It is the insistent intimacy of the Spirit, in God and in us, that undoes us in the end. He gets in under our skin, and is determined to stay there. Paul the apostle speaks of the dimensions of this intimacy:

the spirit searches everything, even the depths of God (1 Cor. 2:10).

So much one does the Spirit become with our spirit that the writer of Proverbs can say:

The human spirit is the lamp of the LORD, searching every inmost part (Prov. 20:27).

Christ's bearing of sin on the cross (as in 1 Pet. 2:24), when 'the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isa. 53:6), is a great mystery that we can never fathom. Could it have come about through the agency of the Holy Spirit who searches the depths of all things, including the hidden reaches of our murky consciences, somehow clearing those crevices across the ages by raking it all out onto him? Certainly it was the Spirit of God that enabled him to see it through (see Heb. 9:14).

Jesus said to his disciples shortly before he died, speaking of the Holy Spirit as 'the Spirit of truth':

You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you (John 14:17).

'You' here is plural, so 'in you' could also mean 'among you'. The disciples have known the Holy Spirit with them, in that Jesus is the man of the Spirit in everything he has said and done. Soon, however, the disciples will be in a new relationship with the Spirit: he will be active in and among them as he has been in the life and ministry of Jesus. At Jesus' request, the Father will give the Holy Spirit to them as He gave the Spirit to Jesus:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth (John 14:16).

Knowing from the inside all that Jesus is and has said and done, the Spirit will bear witness to Jesus:

⁶ See further: Bingham, *The Day of the Spirit*, pp. 41–73; Martin Bleby, *God's Holy Love: For Newcomers to Christian Faith*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2001, pp. 133–138.

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf (John 15:26).

The disciples will also testify (John 15:27). Through them, when he comes, the Spirit will address the world with regard to the issues of sin, righteousness and judgement:

And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about [or *convict the world of*] sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned (John 16:8–11).

These issues are integral to the matter of God's forgiveness of sin. The Holy Spirit will address each of these issues by bearing testimony to Jesus. The refusal to believe in Jesus as the one who takes away sin leaves people in their sin (compare John 3:36; 8:21, 24). Jesus' acceptance by the Father in his death, resurrection and ascension demonstrates Jesus' vindicated righteousness which can be ours by repentance and faith (compare Heb. 1:3). Jesus' bearing of God's judgement on our guilt seals Satan's doom, in that he can no longer accuse of sin those who are in Christ, whose sins he has taken away (compare John 14:30–31, Heb. 2:14–15). For this conviction to happen, the Spirit will bring to the disciples all the words of Jesus:

the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you (John 14:26).

The Spirit will not come just with words, however. The Spirit will bring to bear personally, in the disciples and in those who believe, all the reality of who Jesus is, and what God has done in him. All that Jesus has said and done has come from the Father:

The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works (John 14:10).

All of this—all that is in the Father that the Father has bestowed on the Son—will be brought home to us, amazingly, by the Spirit:

the Spirit of truth . . . will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:14–15).

Thus the entire saving work of God in Christ will be conveyed to us by the Holy Spirit. Not only that, but when the Spirit moves in, so will the Son and the Father move in with him:

he will be in you . . . I am coming to you . . . Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them (John 14:17, 18, 23).

Nothing comes better than that! What more does this tell us about the nature of God's forgiveness of sin? It is not just a transaction—it is an occupation and an indwelling. For the Triune God to come and make His home in us, who have offended grievously against Him—how totally forgiving is that! Not only so, but from there the Spirit 'intercedes with sighs too deep for words' (Rom. 8:26) and Jesus 'always lives to make intercession' for us (Heb. 7:25). So much so that we end up doing the works that Jesus does, and even 'greater works than these' (John 14:12). This is forgiveness, reinstatement and trust indeed!

Questions for Discussion:

- *What more does the indwelling of the Spirit tell us about the nature of God's forgiveness of sin?*
- *What has been our experience of the cleansing, filling and activating indwelling of the Holy Spirit?*

HOLY SPIRIT COMES WITH FORGIVENESS

And so it happens. The risen Jesus came to the disciples with the peace that had been made with God on the cross—the peace of forgiveness—and in the same breath imparted the Spirit for the work of bringing forgiveness to others through the announcement of the gospel:

Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained (John 20:19–23).

Filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Peter announced the gospel to many, and urged them to accept the gift of forgiveness and the Spirit in the one bundle:

Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:38).

As Peter spoke later to the highest council of the land, he depicted the witness of the Holy Spirit as being at the forefront of the gift of forgiveness:

The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him (Acts 5:30–32).

Stephen was 'filled with the Holy Spirit' when he prayed for those who were killing him, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them' (Acts 7:55, 60). It was the Spirit that prompted Philip to join the Ethiopian's chariot and tell him 'the good news about Jesus' (Acts 8:29, 35). Ananias laid his hands on Saul of Tarsus so that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit and immediately urged him, 'Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name' (Acts 9:17, 22:16).

Perhaps the most direct link between the coming of the Spirit and the forgiveness of sins was when Peter was speaking about Jesus in the house of Cornelius. Peter did not get to finish what he had to say. He got as far as saying, 'All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name' (Acts 10:43), when he was interrupted. It was as if the Spirit thought, 'That'll do me—I need wait no longer!'—and down he came:

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word (Acts 10:44).

No doubt in that instant what Peter had just said about forgiveness of sins became a reality in the lives of those who heard. The outward signs, 'speaking in tongues and extolling God' (Acts 10:46), were simply the confirmation and outworking of what they had received. This

being ‘baptized with the Holy Spirit’ was subsequently accepted as proof that ‘God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life’ (Acts 11:16, 18).

The apostles in their writings make the same connection. What comes through to us when ‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’? It is: ‘Christ died for the ungodly . . . while we still were sinners Christ died for us . . . we have been justified by his blood . . . we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son’ (Rom. 5:5, 6, 8, 9, 10)—in other words, the total forgiveness of sins. The condemnation of sin in the flesh of Jesus brings the reality of ‘no condemnation’ to those who then ‘walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit’ (Rom. 8:1, 3, 4). The joy of justification and forgiveness brought by God’s saving kingdom action comes as: ‘righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Rom. 14:17). Paul is able to say to the Corinthians: ‘you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God’ (1 Cor. 6:11). How did the Thessalonians come into salvation? ‘God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth’ (2 Thess. 2:13). Similarly, in the letter to Titus: ‘he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life’ (Titus 3:5–7).

There are references to the forgiveness of sins that do not mention the Holy Spirit in the same context, and of course there are accounts of the Holy Spirit doing many other things besides bringing the forgiveness of sins, but these scriptures show sufficiently that forgiveness comes by the conveyancing action of the Holy Spirit.

Question for Discussion:

- *What further do we learn about forgiveness in connection with the Holy Spirit from these scriptures?*

HOLY SPIRIT AND THE AGE TO COME

We have said that God’s forgiveness of sin is not just to give us relief from guilt but to fit us for our resurrection life in ‘new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home’ (2 Pet. 3:13). We have also said that bringing through to us and bringing us to these things of the age to come is the particular expertise of the Spirit. We conclude by tracing this function of the Spirit in bringing us to the full experience of total forgiveness, where:

God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more

—where there will be no trace of sin or its causes and effects, and ‘nothing unclean’ or evil (Rev. 21:3–4, 8, 27).

We are spoken of as those who ‘have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come’ (Heb. 6:4–5). It is by the Holy Spirit that we are ‘marked with a seal for the day of redemption’ (Eph. 4:30). Paul says, ‘it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first

instalment' (2 Cor. 1:21–22). It is the gift of the Spirit that assures us of this coming reality, so we can live in keeping with it now:

In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:13–14)

It is with this in view that Paul designates the Holy Spirit as the one through whom God reveals 'what God has prepared for those who love him', 'which God decreed before the ages for our glory' (1 Cor. 2:9–10, 8).

We have said that God's forgiveness of sin is not just the defeat and taking away of sin in the cross, but a participation in the vindicated righteousness of the Son of God through his resurrection, and that this is with a view to fitting us to live in the new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwells. The Spirit makes this amply available here and now:

the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23).

This is indeed God's forgiveness of sin being lived out in the present, as we shall know it fully in the age to come. It is to this reality, now as then, that:

The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come' (Rev. 22:17).