

1. The Spirit's work through the apostles

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn up that passage from John chapter 16 again, if we may, on page 902. And the title I have for our thoughts tonight is The Spirit's Work Through the Apostles.

The Spirit's Work Through the Apostles. Many of us know the experience of leaving, perhaps leaving home for the first time, leaving school, leaving a job that you've had for a long time. It can be rather an unsettling and difficult business, painful, tearful even sometimes. And equally, most of us know the experience of being left.

Yet, when you're the one that stays put, but somebody that you care about and love has to move on to something else. What did some poets say?

Passing is such sweet sorrow. Well, perhaps occasionally. But it also can be a bitter or painful sorrow, can't it? I can still remember the day, still, after all these years, when at the age of 11, my father put me in the family car and drove me to boarding school for the very first time in my life and left me there.

[1 : 27] I can still picture myself. I can still picture the very clouds in the sky. I was sitting in the front seat next to my father and my upper lip was quivering. My father looked at me.

He said, you'll be all right. I said, yes, Dad. Actually, it was a lot of fun after the first few days, especially Monday evenings when we had the greasiest beef burgers and chips in the nation, which we used to enjoy enormously.

But I can tell you the moment of parting was very difficult. Now, the chapters that we're studying here in John's Gospel, chapters 14, 15 and 16, are dominated by the fact that Jesus is about to leave.

And his disciples are finding it very difficult. Let's just trace this through. Can we turn together to chapter 13, verse 33? Just back a page. 13, 33.

This is just the beginning of Jesus' long speech here. So 13, 33. Little children, yet a little while I'm with you. You will seek me. And just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, where I am going, you cannot come.

[2 : 37] Or look on to the same chapter, verse 36. Simon Peter said, Lord, where are you going? Jesus answered him, where I am going, you cannot follow me now. But you will follow afterward.

Or then look on to chapter 14, verse 2. 14, 2. In my father's house, he says, are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I'm going.

But Thomas said to him, Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way? Or look on to chapter 14, verse 25. 14, 25.

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. So, it's obvious. I could quote other verses from the passage. He's going. He makes it clear that he's going to the father.

[3 : 39] He's promising his disciples that they will be able to join him eventually, but not yet. And they're very upset. You sense that they're a bit like a little flock of sheep who are about to lose their shepherd.

They've got the quivering lip syndrome. So, how are they going to cope with this? They've been with Jesus for the last three years. And he has been thoroughly their rock, their master.

He's rescued them from storms, from madmen, from demons, from fierce Pharisees, from Herod's men. He's been the unquestioned master of every situation.

And he's got them out of every scrape that they've got themselves into. And now he's leaving them. And as he prepares to go, he tells them what a very rough time they're going to have in the future.

Look at the first few verses of chapter 16. 16, verse 2. So, no wonder they didn't want him to go.

[4 : 54] So, if his departure meant, best case scenario, their exclusion from the synagogue community, and worst case scenario, their death at the hands of Jewish fanatics, of course they wanted him to stay and protect them.

But let's read on, halfway through verse 4. I did not say these things to you from the beginning because I was with you. I didn't need to say them then.

You had quite enough to get your minds around. I think of it back in those early days. You were joining my band of followers, leaving your work and your homes, your families to come with me on the road.

There was a lot to think about. It would have been premature for me to go into all this back then. But now, verse 5, now I'm going to him who sent me. And none of you asks, where are you going? Why not? Well, surely because you're more concerned about yourselves and your own sorrows than you are about me and the great purpose that I'm fulfilling. Your eyes are on yourselves rather than on me.

[5 : 59] What you're feeling is, help, he's leaving us. But you haven't yet got eyes to see the big picture. But, verse 6, because I've said these things to you about my leaving and about how the world will hate you and attack you, for all that reason, sorrow has filled your hearts.

Now, friends, we can sympathise, can't we, with these 11 men. Yes, the four Gospels do paint them as slow and dull-witted. Painfully slow at cottoning on to who Jesus was and what he came to do. But surely you and I would have been equally slow, wouldn't we? After all, the coming to earth of the Son of God was unique. It was unprecedented. It's hardly surprising that it took such a long time for the disciples to understand Jesus.

You think of John, the author of this very Gospel. He was one of those disciples. So he is frankly confessing to us that he too, when it came to recognising who Jesus was, was as thick as two short planks.

When you read his Gospel and his three epistles in the New Testament, you do realise what a profoundly intelligent and insightful man he was. But he was one of the 11 who were listening to Jesus on this Thursday evening and not understanding, and feeling full of sorrow and dread because Jesus was saying that he was about to leave them.

[7 : 27] So I think we must sympathise with John and the other disciples. Let's cut them a bit of slack. But more importantly, let's see what Jesus goes on to tell them in the next few verses.

Because it's the next few verses that bring the answer to their sorrow and pain and teach them that even after his departure, they have a wonderful and purposeful future.

Their future is going to be tough. Now that's a message that permeates this whole section of teaching. But it's going to be a future of joy, not of sorrow. In fact, if you look onto verse 24, you'll see that it will be full of joy.

Sorrow, confusion and perplexity are not going to have the last word in their lives. The truth is that these men are going to be turned around and so taken hold of by the power of God that they will prove to be the most influential and significant group of people that the world has ever known. So let's turn to verse 7. Nevertheless. Nevertheless, it's a great turning point here. Sorrow has filled your heart, he says in verse 6.

[8 : 40] Nevertheless, I tell you the truth. And whenever Jesus says, I tell you the truth, what he means is, pin back your ears, switch off the television set, switch off even the computer and listen.

Because what I'm about to say to you carries all the authority of heaven with it. It's a kind of formula that he uses in his teaching, I tell you the truth. Of course, everything that he says is the truth.

But when he particularly wants to emphasise something, he prefaces it with this phrase, I tell you the truth. He's flagging up that this is something really important. So what is this all-important thing that he's telling them?

I tell you the truth, he says, it is to your advantage that I go away. Advantage, Lord? Are you serious?

How could it possibly be to our advantage that you're leaving us? Yes, it is to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the helper, that's the Holy Spirit, will not come to you.

[9 : 44] But if I go, I will send him to you. So Jesus is saying that it's better for the disciples to have the helper, the Holy Spirit, with them, than it is to have him himself still with them.

Now, on the surface, that sounds improbable, don't you think? You might say, who in their right mind would want the company of God's Spirit, who cannot be seen or touched, when they could

have God's Son, a wonderful, warm, flesh-and-blood human being, who is so attractive that all the broken-down people of society come flocking to him, whose words are like pure gold, whose touch heals the sick, whose voice wakes the dead, whose wisdom silences the purveyors of false religion. Could it really be to our advantage to have the Holy Spirit rather than Jesus himself? The answer is yes. It was to their advantage then, in the first century, and it is still to our advantage today to have the Holy Spirit rather than Jesus with us in bodily form.

Now, why might we shrink from taking that on board? Why might we, today in the 21st century, think that it might be better to have Jesus with us than to have the Holy Spirit?

Surely, because we have an inadequate view of who the Holy Spirit is and of what he does. So, we need to allow Jesus to teach us about the Holy Spirit. That's what this passage is in the Bible for.

[11:18] So, from verses 7 to 15, let me bring you three points. First, the Holy Spirit comes as the next great stage of the Gospel plan.

The next great stage of the Gospel plan. We're thinking big view of history here. So, let me pick it up halfway through verse 7. If I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you.

But if I go, I will send him to you. Now, just think of what is involved in Jesus going. If I go, I will send him to you.

Where was his going going to take him? Well, think it through. An hour or two after saying these words, he was to go to the Garden of Gethsemane. And from the Garden of Gethsemane, where he was arrested, he was going to go to the high priest's house.

And from the high priest's house, on to the headquarters of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

And then, having been flogged and questioned by Pilate, he was to go on to Golgotha, outside the city, where he was to be crucified.

[12:25] His body was then taken to a tomb nearby, and it was buried. Two mornings later, he was raised from death, and about six weeks later, he was taken up to heaven to be seated at the right hand of God the Father, in the place of preeminence.

That's what he meant by going. And it was only after all that going, to his death, his resurrection, and his exaltation, that the Spirit was then able to come and take his place.

But it was the events of that six-week period that changed the world, and changed God's relationship with us. Through his death, Jesus bore the penalty of our sins in our place, thus bringing us forgiveness and peace with God.

Through his resurrection, God vindicated him publicly, and demonstrated that the power of death was now broken. And through his exaltation to heaven, God seated him in the place of preeminence for the whole universe to see.

But Jesus had to go and do this. His death and resurrection and exaltation are the central events of world history.

[13:39] If he had not gone to Gethsemane, to Pilate, to Golgotha, if he had not then been raised and taken up to glory and gone to heaven, there would be no gospel. There would be nothing to cheer us.

There would only be the prospect of death followed by condemnation and hell for all of us. So he had to go if there was to be a gospel. If he had said to them that night, it's okay fellows, I'll change my mind, I'll stay with you after all.

If he'd said that, nothing would have happened. No death of Jesus to deal with our sins, no resurrection of Jesus to display his victory over death, no exaltation of Jesus to show his kingly position to the whole universe.

Nothing. And you and I, friends, would not be here. I don't suppose there'd be a building like this here tonight. We would have nothing to live for but ourselves and our pleasures. And we would be hurtling, all of us rapidly, towards the southern necropolis with no hope in our hearts.

As the Greeks used to say, abandon hope, all ye that enter here. Talking of Hades. But Jesus went. He had to.

[14:53] He wanted to. It was his father's loving purpose. And just a few days after his ascension into heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit, as he promised, with the result that the next great stage in God's great plan could now begin.

And that was the preaching of the gospel to the whole wide world, beginning in Jerusalem, through the words of these very apostles. And then extending to every country of the globe, through the words of countless other Christians, down to and including us in our own day.

But if Jesus had not gone, then the Holy Spirit could not have come. And the apostles, therefore, would have had no advantage. They would have had no power or courage to preach. And there would have been no message to pass on. Nothing. They would have had to return to the Sea of Galilee. The fishermen. No fishing for men for them. Simon Peter would have had to get a new boat, wouldn't he? And a new set of fishing nets. And he would have lived out the rest of his days selling Galilean codfish at 40 pence a pound. So Jesus had to go.

[15:59] And the next glorious stage was then able to begin. The stage that we're still in today in world history, as the gospel continues to be preached by Christians whose lives are filled with the Holy Spirit.

So there's the first thing. Now second, the Holy Spirit comes, came and comes, to convict the world. Here's verse 8.

And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. Now we'll come on to verses 9, 10 and 11 in just a moment because they unpack this rather condensed statement in verse 8.

But I want us first to notice verse 8 and to see, I want us to see how it relates to verse 7. So verse 8. When he comes at Pentecost, and of course during all the years following Pentecost, when he comes, he will do something in relation to the world.

The world. Now remember, we looked at this a fortnight ago, remember two things about the world. First of all, this word world means the whole of human society as organized without reference to God or hostile towards God.

[17:13] The pervasive, fallen, godless aspect of humanity which is in rebellion against God. But remember secondly that God loves the world.

Loves the world so much that he was prepared to give up his son to death for the sake of the world. And it's because God loves the world so much that he was willing not only to send his son into the world to die, but subsequently to send his spirit into the world.

Because even though Jesus before Pentecost had completed his great work on the cross and had been raised and had been exalted, the world was still resisting the truth about him.

It wasn't enough that Jesus had died and been raised. The world now had to be persuaded that the good news about Jesus was urgent and supremely important.

The cross, the resurrection and the ascension was not the end of the story. That message now had to be believed. And it was only by an act of divine power that men and women of the world would have their thinking turned around.

[18:20] They had to be convicted, persuaded, that everything they'd previously understood, everything they'd previously lived for, was not worth a brass farthing. In other words, that they were wrong in their view of life.

And only the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit could bring about that kind of conviction. Can a man of the world or a woman of the world who has lived for years in defiance of God come to be convinced that he was deeply wrong all along?

Certainly not. Unless he is persuaded by divine power. Now, let's notice how verse 8 arises out of verse 7.

And let me say, kind of a little confession here, let me say, I'd never really noticed this connection between verse 7 and verse 8 until the last few days while I was studying these verses. In verse 7, Jesus tells the 11 how the Holy Spirit is going to come.

Look at the end of verse 7. I will send him to you, to you. Not to the people of Iceland, not to the people of California or London, but to you.

[19:32] So when the Holy Spirit came in power from heaven, a few weeks later, he came to the apostles in Jerusalem. The apostles and the small group of other Christians who were with them.

Now, this helps us to understand verse 8. I used to think in a rather vague way until about last Tuesday when I looked at this verse carefully. I used to think that verse 8 meant that when the Holy Spirit came, he descended upon the world all over the place.

You might say from Tasmania to Greenland. And he began to turn people's hearts to the Lord. But the reality is much more specific and focused. He came to the disciples.

I will send him to you. So when in verse 8 he begins to convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment, he's going to be doing this work through these disciples.

The Spirit is located in them. The Spirit is coming to them. So the convicting of the world is going to happen through their preaching, their teaching and their influence.

[20 : 38] Now, Peter, James and John, Philip and Thomas and Andrew and Bartholomew and the rest of you, stick that in your pipes and smoke it. You've got work to do brothers, haven't you? Away with all this sorrow about Jesus leaving you.

The truth is that Jesus is about to send to you the power from heaven that is going to change the world through your preaching and teaching. Now, this, of course, is still going on today.

The Holy Spirit is still now using the preaching and teaching of the apostles to persuade men and women of the world to come to Christ and to rethink their view of sin and righteousness and judgment.

Think of it. At this very moment, all over the world, hundreds of people, at this very moment, thousands of people are becoming Christians. This very moment. because they're listening to the preaching and teaching of the apostles.

The words of the apostles recorded for us in the New Testament are today and will be until Christ returns the means by which men and women who belong to the world are persuaded to forsake the world and come to Christ.

[21 : 47] And it's the Holy Spirit who is doing this powerful work through the apostles. Now, you see, we're not talking about ancient history here. This is happening all over the world at this very moment.

This is why the words of the apostles are more powerful than an atomic bomb. Nuclear fission cannot hold a candle to the gospel. All nuclear fission can do is to bring a load of death.

But the words of the apostles bring life. Now, let's see just how Jesus describes the way in which the Holy Spirit is going to bring conviction to the world.

Well, first, still in verse 8, let's notice that verb, convict. It's a very strong verb. It's more than just convince.

It conveys the idea of a masterly QC, Queen's Council, in a court of law, a tip-top barrister who not only convinces a jury of the truth of his arguments, but does so almost with logical violence and fierceness.

[22 : 55] Arguments of irresistible power that cannot be refuted, so that the jury sits back open-mouthed, wide-eyed, realising that someone has spoken whom nobody can gain say.

Now, that is what happens when a man or woman of the world becomes a Christian. What that man or woman realises is that what the apostles are saying about Jesus cannot be resisted.

You've got to bow the knee. The impossible thing happens. You're persuaded to the very core of your being that Jesus is the king and therefore you must run up the white flag and surrender to him.

Now, friends, let me say this. If there is any person here tonight who has not yet run up the white flag and surrender to Jesus, that is the only important decision for you to make before you die.

Let's look at the way Jesus breaks this down in three categories here in verses 8 to 11. When the Spirit comes, he says, he will convict the world, present these powerful, persuasive arguments to the world concerning sin, righteousness and judgment.

[24 : 14] So, first, concerning sin. Look at verse 9. Concerning sin because they do not believe in me. Now, imagine a young man or young woman, let's say, aged about 20.

A person who is on the point of becoming a Christian. They've been listening to the gospel for some time, they've been reading the Bible, perhaps coming to church, discussing with Christian friends and so on.

What the Holy Spirit will do for that person is persuade them, persuade them that the major truth about them is their sin. Now, they won't have thought of themselves like that.

They will have thought of themselves up to now as perhaps bright and smart and fun to be with and on the human level that may well be perfectly true. But the Holy Spirit now addresses them forcefully as they begin to think about Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit opens their eyes to see not only that they're sinners, not only that the wages of sin is death, but that in particular, as verse 9 puts it, their sin is that for the last 20 years they have not believed in Jesus.

In other words, they've lived life as if Jesus were no more important than Julius Caesar or Oliver Cromwell, just some figure of history who perhaps had some influence and started a movement called the Christian Church, but nothing more than that.

[25 : 41] But now the Holy Spirit presses them to realize that Jesus is in a different category from all other people, that he came to earth as the rescuer, the only rescuer.

And they will realize too that the most heinous and wicked thing in the world is to resist him, to reject him, to keep him out. And they will begin to say as their conscience strikes them, what have I done?

What have I done? I've held myself aloof from the Son of God for all these years, the Son of God who died for me so that I could be eternally saved at the cost of his life.

Now friends, have you felt the pressure of that kind of thinking? That the most wicked thing in the world, the heart of sin, is to withhold your belief in Jesus and your submission to him.

That's the force of verse 9. Now secondly, verse 10, concerning righteousness, righteousness, because I go to the Father and you will see me no longer.

[26 : 44] Now again, when you're at the point of becoming a Christian, you realize that Jesus is righteous, that unlike any other human being, he is without flaw, he's peerless.

So what is the force of verse 10? Well, the Jewish leaders who were about to press for Jesus' crucifixion the very next day, they regarded Jesus as unrighteous, deeply unrighteous.

To their way of thinking, he was simply an imposter, he was a blasphemer, he was a self-styled messiah who lacked all credibility and authority. In fact, they hated him so much that they were determined to do away with him.

But do you remember that this centurion who was supervising the crucifixions, as he stood by the cross and looked up and saw Jesus die and heard Jesus' last words, said about him, surely this was a righteous man.

And Jesus' point here in verse 10 is that his righteousness is proved by his going to the father. If he'd been an imposter and a madman, after his death he would simply have been buried in Palestine and his remains would still be there.

[27 : 59] But that's not what happened. His father raised him and exalted him to heaven, thus vindicating him and showing to the universe that his son was righteous.

It's because he went to the father that his righteousness has been displayed. Then thirdly, from verse 11, concerning judgment because the ruler of this world is judged.

Now the ruler of this world is not the Roman emperor and is not King Herod. This is one of Jesus' descriptions for the devil. You'll see that he uses the same phrase back in chapter 14 verse 30.

Now it's an interesting phrase, isn't it, for Jesus to describe the devil as the ruler of this world. I mean, Jesus knows full well that all rule belongs to God the Father, that God rules everything everywhere, and yet he describes Satan as the ruler of this world.

Why? Because he knows that the Father has allowed Satan a certain grip on the human race. Do you remember how Paul calls Satan the God of this world who has blinded the minds of unbelievers?

[29 : 12] So the point of verse 11 is that the Holy Spirit will convince the world that Satan's power is being torn to ribbons by the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

The cross in particular signals the judgment of Satan. Satan's final, ultimate dismissal into the lake of fire will happen at the very end. But with the death and resurrection of Jesus, Satan's doom is pronounced and his judgment is sealed.

And when we become Christians, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see this. Yes, we're aware that the devil is still active and still powerful, that he's still in the business of blinding the minds of unbelievers, that he still rages around like a bull in a China shop because he knows that his time will soon be up.

All that is true. But judgment and sentence have already been pronounced upon him. He's no longer, therefore, to be feared by Christians. He's toothless, as far as Christians are concerned. He's all gums and no teeth. Toothless, you got it? The Christian, therefore, is beyond his grip. And while he still deceives people and rages about, the kingdom of Christ is growing in this world.

[30 : 32] Every day, tens of thousands of people are leaving the devil's dominion and coming to Christ. That is what is happening. So as we become Christians and leave the company of the world and join the company of God's people, the Holy Spirit takes our minds, as it were, by the scruff of the neck and deeply persuades us, that the heart of sin is not to believe in Jesus, that the demonstration of Jesus' righteousness is that the Father has raised him and exalted him, and that the glorious truth about judgment is that the devil is a toothless old tiger that is soon going to fall

over.

His doom is sealed and destruction awaits him. Now, thirdly, now friends, I'll be very brief here because it's a warm evening, isn't it?

I'm conscious that the sun is beginning to sink over the hills of Jude, and I'm conscious that the children here in the congregation are wriggling and asking which is going to come first, the end of their life or the end of the sermon.

So, I'll be very brief on this last point. So, here's the third thing, and it's a lovely thing too, I'm sorry I've got to rush it. The Holy Spirit comes to teach the truth.

This is the subject of verses 12 to 15, and it's a glorious little passage because it sets out the syllabus of the Christian life, if you like, the syllabus for our ongoing education.

[32 : 00] Look at verse 12. I have much still to say to you, my eleven friends, but you're in no fit state to take it all in now.

But the fact that I'm going does not spell the end of your education in the truth. Because when the Spirit comes, verse 13, he will guide you into all the truth.

And his teaching will be authoritative and trustworthy because he will be passing on to you what he hears from headquarters in heaven. And what will he particularly teach you?

Two things. First, from verse 13, he will declare to you the things that are to come. So he will teach you to understand the truth about the church, how it's to grow, and how everything will come to a final fulfillment at my return.

He'll teach you how to lead the church in the next generation. And then secondly, he will teach you about me. He will take what is mine, that is the truth about me, and he will declare it to you.

[33 : 07] Now all that happened to the eleven, and yet it continues to happen to us today as well. Every time we learn something new about Jesus, it's the Holy Spirit taking the truth about him from the scriptures and opening our hearts to understand it.

So consequently, because the Spirit teaches us about the Lord Jesus, the Spirit helps us to love the Lord Jesus more. Because every time we discover a new angle or a new facet of the truth about Jesus, the truth about his life or his character, his teaching, his death, his resurrection, his glory, his return, it's not simply our minds that are being taught, but our hearts at the same time are being humbled and filled with joy and thankfulness.

Thankfulness that someone so great as the Lord Jesus should have looked with love and mercy upon people like ourselves. So let's learn to be more and more thankful for the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is, in a sense, the shy member of the Holy Trinity. Because as verses 14 and 15 put it, he doesn't glorify himself.

His delight is to put the spotlight on Jesus and to reveal to us how great our Saviour Jesus is. In this sense, the Spirit is a little bit like John the Baptist, who points away from himself towards Jesus and says, don't look at me, look at him.

[34 : 38] And that's why authentic gospel ministry will always have much more to say about Jesus than about the Holy Spirit. The three persons of the Trinity are equal in deity, but each has a different function.

And one of the greatest of the Holy Spirit's functions is to take the life-saving truth about Jesus and for our great benefit to help us to know our Saviour better and better.

And that, friends, is one good reason why, as you grow older as a Christian, life becomes better and better. Men and women of the world see the grey hairs sprouting and they think, oh help, the end is nigh.

But for a Christian, we learn more and more about the Lord Jesus as we get older. It's one of the delights of going on as a Christian. When you're a young Christian, everything's a bit frail and fragile. But as we learn more and more from the Spirit, about Jesus, from the Bible, so our faith becomes stronger and our joy becomes fuller and fuller.

If you're still a youngster, believe me. Believe me. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Let's thank the Lord. Our dear Lord Jesus, we thank you so much that in the midst of facing the crucifixion and the agony of that, you were teaching your dear friends that their joy would become full.

[36 : 05] And we thank you again, dear Lord Jesus, for all you've said about the Holy Spirit, not least about the way that he takes the truth concerning you and magnifies it and brings it to light for our understanding.

And so we pray, Lord Jesus, that you will continue to fill us with him, with the Spirit, and help us, therefore, to know you and to love you better and better and more deeply. Please build us up so that we as a church can tell the gospel and tell it effectively to many people in the days to come. And we ask it all for your dear name's sake. Amen.