

It Is Written

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WHAT IS THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?

By Bill Boyd

My preacher friends do not agree on the meaning of “the gift of the Holy Spirit.” This is frustrating because this expression is at the end of the oft-quoted Acts 2:38. The passage is clear that baptism is “for the remission of sins,” but what does the baptized person receive? Whatever it is, it follows baptism, and this has major theological implications. Calvinist-influenced preachers teach that we can do nothing toward our own salvation until the Holy Spirit does a direct operation on our totally depraved hearts, and only then we can believe and be baptized because we are saved. Acts 2:38 is a big problem for them. Most of my preacher friends are not Calvinists, but they still struggle with what this gift is. Several explanations are offered, and I am OK with explanations that are consistent with what the Bible otherwise teaches.

Some contend that the gift of the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit himself. They associate this with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:9 says, “...ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you.” However, those who think the gift of Acts 2:38 is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit do not always agree on what the indwelling of the Spirit is all about. Some think the Spirit literally dwells in our flesh, but they do not know why and they do not know what he does in there; they just like the idea that he is there. Others think this indwelling Spirit is putting things in their minds that they are not getting from the Bible, and that is a problem. Some suggest that the language of Romans 8:9 is the language of fellowship because it also speaks of us being “in the Spirit.” They compare this with the fellowship language Jesus used in reference to his Father in John 17:21. I am content with this being a spiritual indwelling that is accomplished by the word of the Spirit dwelling in our minds (See Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 5:17-19, and Romans 12:2). However, when it comes to Acts 2:38, these indwelling ideas seem out of context.

When the apostles received the baptism of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, they were able to speak in tongues. Later we learn that the apostles could impart spiritual gifts to others through the laying on of hands. Some think this “gift of the Holy Spirit” is referring to these miraculous gifts. To their credit, the only other place where we read the words “gift of the Holy Spirit” is in Acts 10:45 where it refers to a miraculous gift. However, in Acts 2 the next verse says, “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all them that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:39). That sounds like “the gift” is “the promise,” and that the promise was to be general and enduring. Miraculous gifts were not general and enduring; so that is a problem.

The simplicity of the next explanation intrigues me. Peter began his sermon with a promise: “...whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). “Whosoever” (Acts 2:21) describes “...you, and your children, and all them that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:39). That ties the promise at the beginning of the promise at the end of the sermon. Now if “the promise” is salvation, and if “the gift” is the promise, then “the gift” is salvation. That fits the context, it is simple, and it teaches nothing that is not elsewhere taught in the New Testament. An objection is that this makes Peter redundant. Peter had just said to be baptized “for the remission of sins,” so why would he tell them that they would be given the gift of salvation? In response, I suggest that this is not fully redundant; it is expressing different aspects of salvation in different terms. Even if it seems somewhat redundant, such redundancy can add to the force of a teaching. Peter is telling them

that if they are baptized for something (the remission of sins), they will receive it (salvation). Besides, salvation is a gift of the Holy Spirit, for by the Spirit we are born again, renewed, sanctified, washed, and justified (John 3:5, Titus 3:5, Romans 15:17, II Thessalonians 2:13, I Corinthians 6:11), and it is in response to the teachings of the Spirit that we are baptized (I Corinthians 12:13).

We may not all be fully settled on what the gift of the Holy Spirit is, but we know that if we are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of our sins then we will be counted among the saved (Acts 2:41, 47), and we are sure that all the spiritual blessings that come with this will be ours (Ephesians 1:3).

A Changed Man: The Story of King Manasseh

By Bryan Gibson

And a drastic or dramatic change it was, because at one point King Manasseh of Judah was about as evil as a man could be. He built altars and images for all kinds of false gods, and even placed some of them in the temple (2 Kings 21:3-7). He “made his son pass through the fire, practiced soothsaying, used witchcraft, and consulted spiritists and mediums” (2 Kings 21:6). He “shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to the other” (2 Kings 21:16). His evil was even greater because of the influence he had on his people—“Manasseh seduced them to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord had destroyed before the children of Israel” (2 Kings 21:9). King Manasseh made a mess of his life, and he dragged a lot of people down with him. In fact, Manasseh was largely responsible for the Babylonian captivity His people suffered (Jeremiah 15:4).

Thankfully, the story doesn’t end there. To punish Manasseh, God sent “the captains of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze fetters, and carried him off to Babylon” (2 Chronicles 33:11). Talk about a wake-up call! “Now when he was in affliction, he implored the LORD His God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed to Him; and He received his entreaty, heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God” (2 Chronicles 33:12-13). Despite all the evil Manasseh had done, when he repented, God forgave him and restored him to his kingdom. Manasseh then spent the rest of his life serving the Lord (2 Chronicles 33:14-17).

It’s a sad story, but it does have a happy ending. Here are a few things Manasseh might like to say to us—if he were here today. And yes, there is a way in which the dead still speak (Hebrews 11:4).

Don’t live like I did—before I came to my senses. I hurt myself, as well as a lot of other people. Yes, I was forgiven, and yes, I was restored to my kingdom, but I (and MANY others) still had to live with the consequences of my actions. I served the Lord faithfully in my later years, but think about how much good I could have done if I had started much earlier (and I did know better then).

If you have given yourself over to sin like I did, quit! You don’t have to stay in that same rut. Even if you’re just dabbling in it, stop. You may not get the same kind of wake-up call I got (dragged off with nose hooks), so consider this your wake-up call—this very article. With God’s help, I made a drastic change in my life, and so can you.

God’s grace is a marvelous thing indeed. No matter what you’ve done, no matter how many people you’ve hurt, no matter how many times you’ve provoked Him to anger, He is willing to forgive. Yes, I humbled myself before Him, and yes, I repented, but I still didn’t deserve what He gave me. You don’t deserve it either, but you would be foolish not to take it. Repent of your sins, and seek His forgiveness—and don’t wait; please do it today!