

I am going to do something a little different in this sermon. We are going to put a little phrase in Colossians 1:8 in its larger biblical context. Let me first read the whole sentence in this phrase is found. It begins in verse 7. Referring to Epaphras, Paul writes, “He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.” It is the last three words that I want us to see in their larger biblical context – the words, “in the Spirit.” Paul is saying that Epaphras has made known to him the love of the Colossians “in the Spirit.” This sermon is not an exposition of that phrase, but its purpose is to help us to understand the significance of that phrase.

Paul is saying that the love that the Colossians had for all the saints was “love in the Spirit.” His meaning is that the love that was the fruit of the gospel in the lives of the Colossians was the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in them. “Love in the Spirit” means love by the Spirit. When Christians live lives of love it is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. That is what Paul is saying here.

Now a phrase like this is easy to just pass over without really paying attention to it. And quite a few references in the NT to the Holy Spirit are like that. There are passages in which the Holy Spirit gets significant attention, but there are also quite a few, like this, one where the Holy Spirit is mentioned in a short phrase and then the thought moves on. But behind such a brief mention of the Holy Spirit is the overall biblical teaching about the Holy Spirit and that is very very significant in the biblical message and so I thought it would be honoring to the Holy Spirit to take the time in this context to give a bit of an overview of the biblical teaching about the Holy Spirit so that we get a sense of the tremendous significance of the little phrase “love in the Spirit.”

A related reason to do this is found in verse 10, which we will eventually get to in our study. There Paul tells the Colossians that he is praying that they will increase in the knowledge of God. Increasing in the knowledge of God is at the heart of spiritual growth. If we are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, we need to grow in our knowledge of God. If we love God we want to know him better. Knowledge of God is at the heart of delighting in God and worshipping him. And so taking some time to reflect on the great significance of the Holy Spirit is in keeping with that priority.

The Holy Spirit is one of the three persons of the one God. Taking all the relevant biblical teaching together the church has formulated the doctrine of the Trinity which is that there is one God who exists in three persons, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. The Bible teaches that there is one God. It also teaches that the Father is God, that Jesus is God and that the Holy Spirit is God. It is beyond the reach of human reason to understand exactly how God can be one and three at the same time, but since God is infinite and we are finite, we should not be surprised that there are things about God that we cannot understand. I’m not going to take the time to demonstrate from Scripture how we come to the doctrine of the Trinity. But I just wanted to mention it as we begin. The Holy Spirit is God together with the Father and the Son.

It is interesting and significant that Paul in these opening verses of Colossians mentions God the Father, our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. That is something that we find more often in the NT – that the three persons of the Trinity are mentioned in close proximity to one another.

Now the truth that Paul mentions almost in passing in verse 8 – that the love of the Colossians was “in the Spirit” belongs to the glory of the NT teaching of salvation. Paul and the other NT authors are tremendously excited and enthusiastic about the meaning and significance of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension into heaven and his current location at the right hand of God the Father. And one of the truths that they are very enthusiastic about is that Jesus had brought about a new era in the history of God’s plan of salvation. And one of the things that characterized that new era was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of God that took place on the day of Pentecost. The new era was the era of the fulfillment of God’s promises. Jesus himself was the Saviour who had been promised throughout the OT era and he inaugurated the age that the whole OT was moving towards. The Bible refers to this new era in a number of different ways. It is the last days. It is the time of the new covenant. It is the coming of the kingdom of God. And it was the age of the ministry of the Spirit.

Paul uses that kind of language in 2 Corinthians 3. He refers to the old covenant as the ministry of death and the new covenant as the ministry of the Spirit. He refers to the old covenant as the ministry of death because the law apart from the Spirit kills. The law exposes our sins, but it does not give the power for obedience. That is why the law apart from the Spirit kills. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:6, “For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

In the OT period the Holy Spirit was not yet poured out upon the people of God. It is not that he is absent altogether, but he worked in far fewer people than he would in the last days. There were some people saved in the OT period and they were saved by the Holy Spirit, but the majority of the covenant people ended up being covenant breakers. The law by itself did not save them. It condemned them.

But God promised a time when the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon his people. Ezekiel 11:19-20 says, “And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them ... that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them.” While the Spirit did work in some of the people of God in the OT times, this promise is speaking about something new in terms of the scope of the influence of the Holy Spirit. This is part of the OT expectation for a day in the future when God the Spirit would indwell his people in a new way in terms of scope and intensity. Whatever Ezekiel is speaking about for the future was not the case in the OT and it would be the case in the day of the fulfillment of this promise.

Joel 2:28-29 is another important promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit. “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, you old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.” This is the passage that Peter cites on the day of Pentecost. The outpouring of

the Holy Spirit upon the church that happened on the day of Pentecost was the fulfillment of the OT promises like the ones I have just quoted that God the Holy Spirit was going to be poured out upon the people of God in a way that he never had been in the OT era.

This outpouring was directly related to what Jesus had accomplished by his life, death and resurrection. After being raised from the dead and revealing himself as the risen Christ to his disciples, Jesus ascended into heaven, was seated at God's right hand and from there he poured out the Holy Spirit upon his church as one of the great fruits of his saving work while he was on earth. In Acts 2:33 Peter says of Jesus, "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing." With the resurrection, ascension and outpouring of the Holy Spirit the new age of salvation had arrived – the beginning of the last days – the beginning of the new creation – the inauguration of the new covenant – the age of the Spirit.

This is a very big deal in the NT. John the Baptist had introduced Jesus as the one who would baptize the people of God with the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts describes what happened as a result of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is mentioned many times as Luke describes the early expansion of the NT Church. One of the great gifts given to those who believed in Jesus was the gift of the Holy Spirit. As Peter promised in his sermon on Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." And throughout the book of Acts we read about the Holy Spirit equipping the apostles and other missionaries, directing their work and filling the people who responded to the gospel – changing and renewing their lives.

So we are living in the age of the Holy Spirit and that according to the NT is reason for joy and excitement and hope. The OT promises concerning the giving of the Holy Spirit who would enable the people of God to live lives of obedience and service, had been fulfilled through Jesus' mission and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as one of the great rewards of that mission. We get a sense of the exhilaration from a passage like Acts 13:52 which says, "And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."

Thomas Schreiner sums up the significance of the outpouring of the Spirit with these words: He had been writing about the significance of Jesus and then he writes, "What is also remarkable about the NT witness, however, is the role of the Spirit in God's saving work in Christ. The Spirit is the eschatological sign that the new age has arrived, that the new creation has become a reality. The saving work of God in Christ is implemented through the work of the Spirit" (*New Testament Theology*, p. 431).

All of this is behind the reference to the Holy Spirit in Colossians 1:8 where Paul speaks of the Colossians "love in the Spirit." Those three little words "in the Spirit" need to be understood in the light of the grand perspective that I have just outlined. They are a reference to the fact that believers in Jesus Christ are living in the age of the Holy Spirit and that we have all received the gift of the Holy Spirit who empowers us for living

the Christian life. The love for God and for people, which is there to some extent in all true Christians is, “love in the Spirit.”

We will now move on to consider a few aspects of the NT teaching about the Holy Spirit and his role in the Christian life. And the first thing that we need to consider is the relationship between faith and repentance and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Think back to Peter’s gospel invitation on the day of Pentecost. Acts 2:38, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” This verse seems to suggest that first you turn to the Lord in repentance and faith and then you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. However in other places in the NT we are taught that we are not able to believe and repent apart from the gift of the Holy Spirit. For instance in 1 Corinthians 12:3 Paul writes, “[N]oone can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.” In Acts 5:31 Peter says of Jesus, “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” Peter is saying that repentance is a gift that Jesus gives, and we know that Jesus works through the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 2 we are taught that by nature we are dead in sin and that God makes us alive in Christ and that faith is a gift of God. If we are dead in sin, it is clear that God must make the first move. People who are spiritually dead can’t believe or repent unless they are first made alive and so the Holy Spirit must first give life before we are able to turn to Jesus.

So on one hand you have Peter saying that we must repent and believe and then we will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, but on the other hand both Peter and Paul teach that repentance and faith are gifts that the Holy Spirit gives. The answer to this problem is that both of these perspectives are true, but in different ways.

From the perspective of what is going on deep within us when God is saving us the Holy Spirit makes the first move. We are dead. He makes us alive. But from the point of view of our conscious experience we are to come to Jesus as needy people who need the life-giving Spirit to turn from our sins and trust in Jesus. It is always somewhat of a mystery to relate God’s work in saving us to the call to repent and believe. There is on the one hand the work of the Holy Spirit deep within our hearts and there is on the other hand our conscious experience of hearing the gospel and heeding the call to repent and believe. So in connection with the dilemma we are discussing, from the perspective of our need to be raised from the dead spiritually, the Holy Spirit is the one who gives us life. From the perspective of our conscious experience we are simply to respond to the gospel message and come to Jesus to receive among other things, the Holy Spirit so that we will be enabled to live the life that we are called to live.

The second aspect of the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life that I want to consider with you is his presence in our lives as a seal and guarantee. Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit using those terms in Ephesians 1:13-14 where he writes these words which are intended to be of great comfort to us: “In him [Christ] you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the

praise of his glory.” So believers are “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” and the Holy Spirit is “the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it.” Clearly these words are intended to be of great comfort to believers.

So what does it mean that believers are “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit?” The Holy Spirit himself is the seal. A person who believes receives the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is the seal. A seal is a stamp or a mark that guarantees the authenticity of a document. A diploma for instance will have seal that guarantees that it is not a fake. That it is the real thing. It is significant that in the book of Revelation the servants of God are sealed and that seal protects them during the judgements of God that are poured out upon the wicked. The seal is something that God sees. It marks the people of God as his and those who are so sealed are protected by God.

Gregory Beale in his wonderful commentary on the book of Revelation says this about the sealing of God’s people in the book of Revelation, “In the light of the broader theology of the NT, the “seal” may best be identified with the Holy Spirit, since the seal primarily connotes a guarantee of spiritual protection.”

So the Holy Spirit by dwelling in those who believe is the seal that marks the people of God as the people of God and so they are authenticated as Christians and protected. We know that the Holy Spirit dwells in us because he is promised to those who believe and by means of his work in our lives. In the light of the phrase we are looking at in Colossians 1, we can say that when there is love for God and love for the saints, it is an indication of the indwelling of the Spirit. We will look at this a little more in our next point. For now just think of the fact that if the Holy Spirit dwells in us giving us faith and prompting us towards pleasing God, he is the seal that marks us as belonging to God and we are authenticated as those who are true servants of God.

Closely related to that is the next phrase in Ephesians 1 where Paul says in verse 14 that the Holy Spirit is “the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it.” The inheritance is life in the promised land. The inheritance is our final salvation. Peter refers to this as “an inheritance that is imperishable undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.” The indwelling of the Holy Spirit according to Paul in Ephesians 1 is “the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire the possession of it.” That means if the Holy Spirit is dwelling in us, he is like a deposit that is a guarantee of the full payment to come. Peter O’Brien writes, “Behind this translation lies the word that signifies a ‘down payment’ or ‘pledge’, and which in the NT is used only in the Pauline writings and always with reference to the Spirit of God.” He continues, “[I]n giving him to us God is not simply promising us our final inheritance but actually providing us with a foretaste of it, even if it is ‘only a small fraction of the future endowment.’” (Commentary, p. 121).

This is an amazing truth. The Holy Spirit dwells in those who believe. We know he is there by his fruit in our lives. We will be aware that the Holy Spirit has not yet perfected us. If we are believers there will be the fruit of love and obedience, but there will be many remaining sins and weaknesses. But the fact that the Holy Spirit is dwelling in us and is producing fruit in our lives is the down payment or pledge of the full inheritance to

come. One day he will empower us to live lives without sin. What we experience now is just a small taste of what we will experience in the future, but that beginning is a guarantee that the promised fullness is to come.

We will look at one more passage. In Galatians 5:16 Paul writes “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” The flesh here is our sinful nature that remains in us. Because of our sinful nature, we have sinful desires. Because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit we have desires for holiness – desires for a life that is pleasing to God. But because of the sinful nature we have sinful desires. But Paul is telling us here that we can keep from gratifying the desires of the flesh by walking by the Spirit.

If we are believers we have the Holy Spirit, but that does not mean that the Holy Spirit takes over and we just go along for the ride. That is not God’s way. We are involved in living a life that is pleasing to God. We are called to put forth effort in dependence on the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will enable us to make progress in the fight against the desires of the flesh, but he does it in the way of our own involvement and effort. The Holy Spirit works in us as human beings created in God’s image. We are not machines. We are not puppets. We are not robots. We are human beings created in God’s image and that means we have the ability now equipped by the Holy Spirit to make decisions and apply ourselves to the pursuit of holiness. So Paul tells us to “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

This is a struggle as the next verse makes clear. Galatians 5:17 says, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” So there is struggle, but progress is possible by walking in the Spirit.

And that is a great encouragement. Yes, the fight against sin is hard. Yes, living the Christian life involves struggle against sin. But we will grow. We will change. We will make progress by walking by the Spirit – that is by moving forward in obedience in dependence on the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. In verse 22 Paul tells us “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...” We can grow in these areas. The battle is not hopeless because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

So we have covered some of the biblical background for the little phrase in Colossians 1:8 – “love in the Spirit.” Epaphras has told Paul about the Colossians “love in the Spirit” and that little phrase must be understood in the light of the wonderful biblical teaching about the significance of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. We are living in the age of salvation – the age of the fulfillment of the promise of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is at work in us in a way that he was not at work in the Old Covenant situation. And the life that he enables us to live is a foretaste of the life we will live in fullness when the new creation comes in its fullness.

This is reason for joy and thanksgiving and hope. What a blessing it is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit! What a blessing it is to experience his work in our lives enabling us to fight the fight of faith and to make some progress in love and holiness and obedience. We have a ways to go. There is still much of the flesh. But his

presence in our hearts and lives is the seal that we belong to God and the deposit of the fullness what is to come. Let us be encouraged then, by the awesome significance of the gift of the Holy Spirit and with expectation give ourselves fully to living the kind of life that is pleasing to God and the goal of our salvation.