

Chapter 26: The Indwelling Holy Spirit

Acts 10:34–48

At long last, the great turning point in the history of missions in the church of Jesus Christ has come. Finally, the Holy Spirit extends the proclamation of God beyond Israel—and even beyond Samaria—to Gentiles. Through Cornelius and his family, the Lord accomplishes something stunning in the context of the Scriptures up to this point: God’s Holy Spirit indwells (ceremonially) unclean and uncircumcised Gentiles. What took place under the ministry of the Apostle Peter, however, did not fizzle out as some strange accident. In God’s mercy and grace, he continues to indwell believers from every tribe, language, people, and nation by his Spirit. Today, *through the Holy Spirit, enjoy your immediate relationship with God.*

The Holy Spirit Anointed Jesus (Acts 10:34–43)

On behalf of “all” who were gathered there “in the presence of God,” Cornelius asked Peter “to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord” (Acts 10:33). Although Peter does ultimately get to a clear gospel proclamation of what Jesus did in his life, death, and resurrection, he does not begin there. Instead, Peter first declares something that he had learned from his vision: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (vv. 34–35). The term “partiality” translates the term προσωπολήμπτης (*prosōpolēmtēs*), which very literally means “face taker.” Lenski offers a helpful bridge to explain the idiom: “it refers to a judge who looks at a man’s face and renders a verdict, not in accord with the merits of the case, but according as he likes or dislikes the man.”¹ God, Peter insists, does not bless those he *likes* and curse those he *dislikes*; rather, he shows no partiality, so that even Gentiles can be accepted by him through faith in Jesus Christ.

Immediately, this statement seems to stand in tension with the biblical theology of God’s *election*, especially in regard to Israel. Did God not choose Israel as his beloved people, and did he not bless them (and not others) on the basis of that election (Deut. 4:37; 7:6–8; 10:14–15; 14:2; 26:18–19; 28:1–14; 1 Sam. 12:22; 1 Kgs. 8:51–53; Ps. 33:12; 105:6; 135:4; 147:19–20; Isa. 41:8–9; 43:1, 4; 44:1–2; Jer. 31:3, 35–37; Amos 3:2; Mic. 7:18–20; Mal. 1:2–3)? Indeed, the Lord did choose Israel in his sovereign election; however, there are two factors that distinguish the Lord’s covenantal, electing love for his people from the sin of partiality. First and most importantly, partiality arises as a *reaction* to something about the object of favor or disfavor. The Scriptures make very clear that the Lord did not choose Israel because of anything special about *Israel*, but only because of the free grace and mercy of God. This is why the Old Testament so frequently describes the Lord’s having “set his love” upon them (i.e., something *he* did), rather than loving them for something that *they* have done.

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 418.

So, it is not because of Israel's outward size and impressiveness that he chose them:

[6] For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. [7] It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD *set his love on you* and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, [8] but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut. 7:6–8)

Further, it is not because of their righteousness that the Lord chose them:

[5] Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. [6] Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people. (Deut. 9:5–6)

Instead, the Lord's love for his people arises purely from his sovereign decision to set his love upon them, as the Lord repeats in Deuteronomy 10:15: "Yet the LORD *set his heart in love* on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day." As Calvin observes, the cause for the Lord's love on Israel rather than the Gentiles in the Old Testament "ought not to be sought in the persons of men, but it doth wholly depend upon the hidden counsel of God....he did not this being moved with any external respect, but (all) the whole cause remained in his wonderful counsel."² Theologically, the Lord's love is an *affection* arising from the Lord's deliberate, wise, choice. Further, the Lord's love is not a *passion*, reacting favorably one day and unfavorably another (Mal. 3:6).

The second thing we should observe in the distinction between partiality and election is how the Lord's covenantal love established accountable requirements for his people. Amos 3:2 puts this point starkly: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." It is a constant temptation to us to show partiality where we favor people we love and trust, often willingly excusing the same faults in our preferred people that we would rigorously prosecute in those we do not prefer. While the Lord makes provision for the forgiveness of his people, this does not mean that he fails to hold them accountable for their sin. Indeed, their special place in his affections means that they are held to higher standards. As Bruce writes, "God's choice of Israel was an act of grace, not of partiality, and that it called for a response of obedient service, not of careless complacency."³

Rather than accepting and rejecting people on the basis of any external characteristic in those

² Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:438.

³ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 225.

people (especially their race, ethnicity, or nationality), Peter has learned that the Lord receives people on the basis of true, living, active faith—the kind of faith that produces the fruit of obedience: “in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (v. 35). There are two errors to avoid in interpreting this statement. First, Peter does not at all mean that “all religions lead to God.”⁴ The only hope for salvation, as Peter will acknowledge shortly, is through faith in Jesus Christ. What Jesus did through his life, death, and resurrection was utterly unique, and there is no true fear of God that does not embrace Christ by faith.

Second, we should not understand Peter as denying that justification comes by faith alone, because Peter is not addressing that question here. Later, the Apostle Paul would very explicitly answer those questions, declaring, “we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28). Peter is simply acknowledging the corresponding biblical truth that true, living, active, and *saving/justifying* faith will necessarily flow out into good works of obedience (doing “what is right”). James makes the same point when he insists that saving faith is justified (i.e., proven to be true and genuine) by the works that it produces (Jas. 2:14–26). Thus, Abraham was justified by faith (Gen. 15:6), but the genuineness of his faith was vindicated when he “offered up his son Isaac on the altar” in Genesis 22 (Jas. 2:21). Thus, the whole Scriptures teach that *people* are justified (i.e., counted righteous) by *faith alone*, but that *faith* is justified (i.e., vindicated; proven to be true and genuine) by *works*.⁵ Two things are true at the same time: works do not play any role in our justification, but the kind of “faith” that does not produce works is not a genuine, justifying faith.

To set the stage for the gospel that he will preach to these Gentiles, Peter then reminds the Gentiles of the gospel that came first to Israel, beginning with the life and ministry of Jesus:

[36] “As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), [37] you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: [38] how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.” (vv. 36–38).

To begin, Peter characterizes the gospel that Jesus preached as “good news of peace through Jesus Christ” (v. 36a). Peter will later explain the nature and the need for peace when he describes Jesus as “the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead” (v. 42) and then holds out the promise that “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (v. 43).⁶ Yet, this need for peace is not peculiar to the Jews, since, as Peter here declares, Jesus (lit., “this one”) “is Lord of all,” and not Israel only (v. 36b).⁷ Apparently, Cornelius as a God-fearer already had some

⁴ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 335.

⁵ “This is the fear of which both Testaments speak constantly, the mark of godly men, the fear of reverence, faith, obedience.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 418.)

⁶ “Since it is here used in connection with ‘the Word’ and the verb ‘gospelizing,’ ‘peace’ must refer to the saving peace of salvation for sinners when God accepts the sinner for Christ’s sake and remits all his sins. This mighty statement should not be toned down by introducing peace between Jew and Gentile, between nation and nation, man and man.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 420.)

⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, 260.

knowledge (“you yourselves know”) about the life and ministry of Jesus, including Jesus’ baptism, anointing with the Holy Spirit, and his ministry of casting out unclean spirits (vv. 37–38). We should recall that the word “anoint” is the root idea behind “Messiah” (Hebrew) and “Christ” (Greek), both meaning “Anointed One,” so that Bruce observes that we might bring out the full force of the meaning that “God anointed Jesus” by translating it as “God made him Messiah.”⁸

We should not overlook the significance of Jesus’ earthly ministry in this gospel presentation. Although Jesus’ death and resurrection (which Peter will announce shortly) were the places where the mission of Jesus came to its culmination, his life and ministry laid a foundation for the significance of his death and resurrection. Especially, Jesus lived a life of obedience as the Second Adam who overcame the tyranny of the devil by resisting his temptations at the beginning of his ministry, and by casting out demons through the length of his ministry (Luke 11:20–22).⁹ Jesus’ earthly ministry was not a soft, therapeutic ministry of compassion without teeth; Jesus was storming the gates of hell—gates that had been raised in the midst of God’s people by casting out demons “by the finger of God” (Luke 11:20), “for God was with him” (v. 38). In the Old Testament, the battles that God’s people faced were showdowns of Yahweh against the pagan gods whom the nations worshiped. By victory on the battlefield, Yahweh demonstrated his sovereignty and Lordship over *all* the nations. Part of the reason that Peter mentions the power of Jesus for “healing all who were oppressed by the devil” is to provide proof that Jesus is, indeed, “Lord of all”—not only of the spiritual realm, but even Lord over the nations.

Still, Jesus’ earthly ministry was only the foundation, not the capstone of what his Father had sent him to do. At this point, Peter takes up the primary mantle of the apostolic function: to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus (see Acts 1:22):

[39] And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, [40] but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, [41] not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. (vv. 39–41)

In crediting God with the resurrection of Jesus, Lenski connects what Peter says here with his earlier speeches: “We feel the throbbing contrasts that we have seen Peter use against the Sanhedrin and the Jews (2:36; 3:13–15; 4:10; 5:30, 31). *God* anointed him, *God* was with him, but they *even* made away with him, and then *God* raised him up.”¹⁰ *They* executed Jesus on a tree, but *God* raised him up and manifested him to witnesses who were not deceived by hallucinations, but who even “ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.” Polhill notes that the resurrection of the body was a difficult concept that cut across much pagan philosophy (see Acts 17:18, 32), making the emphasis on “eating and drinking” important to identify as a potential stumbling block at the heart of the gospel for Cornelius and his friends to understand.¹¹ When Jesus’ own apostles had struggled to believe the resurrection after seeing Jesus’ hands and feet, Jesus further proved the reality of his resurrection by eating food before them (Luke 24:42–43).

⁸ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 227.

⁹ Brandon D. Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 425.

¹¹ Polhill, *Acts*, 262.

Finally, Peter applies this message by insisting that “everyone who believes in him” may be saved: “And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (vv. 42–43). Whereas the speeches of Christians to Jews (both Peter’s and Stephen’s) had been filled with Old Testament references, one sign that this message has been tailored to the needs of Gentiles is the emphasis on specific points that Gentiles may have struggled with (e.g., the universal Lordship of Jesus and resurrection from the dead), while relatively lightly mentioning the continuity with the Old Testament Scriptures (“To him all the prophets bear witness...”).¹² Jesus’ fulfillment of Old Testament promises and prophecies is still important, but Peter is selective about emphasizing the points that this particular audience needs to hear.

The Holy Spirit Indwells You (Acts 10:44–48)

At this point, the Holy Spirit himself interrupts Peter’s sermon: “While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word” (v. 44). Since Peter had been the only one to see the vision of the animals in the sheet falling from heaven, there still may have been doubts about whether the Lord truly intended the gospel to come to Gentiles without those Gentiles first becoming Jews. The Holy Spirit personally dispels any remaining doubts, though, when he “fell on all who heard the word.” The significance of this step is difficult to overstate to confirm the acceptance of Gentiles into the covenant family, as Calvin notes: “this is an excellent seal of the calling of the Gentiles; because the Lord would never have vouchsafed to bestow upon the Gentiles the graces of his Spirit, unless it had been to declare that even they were adopted together into the society of the covenant.”¹³ The fact that these Gentiles spoke in tongues, as at the Day of Pentecost (v. 46a; cf. Acts 2:4–12) has led theologians to understand this moment as the “Pentecost of the Gentile world.”¹⁴

As we discussed in the previous study, genuine, God-given barriers had kept Gentiles out of the parts of the temple where the Jews would gather for worship (the “dividing wall of hostility”; Eph. 2:14). The various ceremonial laws (including the food laws and the separation of the Jews from interaction with Gentiles in their homes) were given for the purpose of preserving the holiness of the tabernacle/temple, as stated most clearly in Leviticus 15:31: “Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst” (see also Lev. 11:44–45; 18:24–30; 20:2–3, 24–26; Num. 19:13, 20; 35:33–34; Ezek. 44:6–9). Especially important in this regard is the command that the Lord gives in Ezekiel 44:9: “Thus says the Lord GOD: No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, of all the foreigners who are among the people of Israel, shall enter my sanctuary.” The Holy Spirit had commanded Peter to move beyond the barriers of the food laws and association with Gentiles already. In this light, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit provides the final confirmation of the abolition of the division between Jew and Gentile on the basis of reasoning from greater to the lesser (*a maiori ad minus*): i.e., if the Spirit *who made the temple holy* now indwells these Gentiles directly, then why would the dividing wall of hostility that kept the Gentiles *out* of the temple have any effect in continuing to

¹² Polhill, *Acts*, 263.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:451.

¹⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 400, citing F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 264.

divide the people of God?¹⁵

Seeing the work of God in their midst, “Peter declared, ‘Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’” (v. 46b–47). The word “withhold” is the same word that the Ethiopian eunuch had used regarding his own baptism, but with a significant difference. There, the eunuch asked “What *prevents* me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36). Peter’s question has the same force, but he asks the question in a different way, not asking what prevents *these Gentiles* from being baptized, but whether anyone can “*withhold* water for baptizing these people.” Lenski observes that, while the Ethiopian’s question did not give us any clue as to the mode of baptism, this question does:

When Peter asks about someone hindering the water he is not thinking of the Mediterranean or some body of water but of water to be brought in; somebody might try to prevent its being brought in. We may hinder a person from going to a body of water but never the body of water itself. Peter’s question does not suggest immersion. It sounds as though the whole company was promptly baptized with water that had been brought into the room where all were assembled.¹⁶

In line with the pattern of the historic church, “Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring, or sprinkling water upon the person.”¹⁷

After having “commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ,” these new Gentile believers “asked him to remain for some days” (v. 48). Peter has already done much to violate ceremonial Jewish laws in coming to these Gentiles, but his staying with them—especially since this stay entailed *eating* with them—will be a source of criticism among the circumcision party in Jerusalem (Acts 11:3). Nevertheless, the Spirit’s powerful outpouring confirmed for Peter that he had come entirely in obedience to God.¹⁸

Discussion Questions

1. What does “partiality” mean (v. 34)? What does it mean that “God shows no partiality” (v. 34)? What is the difference between partiality and election? How does God’s lack of partiality provide

¹⁵ “Apart from such external manifestations, none of the Jewish Christians present, perhaps not even Peter himself, would have been so ready to accept the fact that the Spirit had really come upon them. Peter’s Jewish Christian companions who had come with him from Joppa were astounded by what they saw and heard: Gentiles—those ‘lesser breeds without the law’—had actually received the same Holy Spirit as Jewish believers in Jesus had already received. How right Peter had been in his new insight into the impartiality of God as between men of one race and another!” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 230.)

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 434.

¹⁷ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 28.3.

¹⁸ “Always the demonstration of the Spirit serves a single purpose—to show that the advance in witness comes directly from God, is totally due to divine leading. This was especially important in this instance. Peter had already shown his own hesitancy to reach out to Gentiles. More conservative elements in Jerusalem would be even more reticent. Only an undeniable demonstration of divine power could overrule all objections, and God provided precisely that in Cornelius’s house.” (Polhill, *Acts*, 264.)

comfort to believers? How does God's election challenge believers in their faith and obedience? What is the nature of the relationship between faith ("anyone who fears him") and obedience ("and does what is right"; v. 35)?

2. What does Peter preach to these Gentiles about the earthly life and ministry of Jesus (vv. 36–38)? Why does Peter emphasize that Jesus is "Lord of all" (v. 36)? Where does John the Baptist fit into the ministry of Jesus (v. 37)? In light of the vv. 44–48, why is it significant to read about how the Holy Spirit anointed Jesus (v. 38)? Why does the Spirit empower Jesus to heal those oppressed by demons (v. 38)? What does Peter preach about the death and resurrection of Jesus (v. 39–40)?

3. How does the Holy Spirit's action in vv. 44–46 compare to the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2? Why does the Holy Spirit now need to fall upon Gentiles? What God-given barriers had separated Jews from Gentiles throughout the period of the Old Testament? How does the giving of the Holy Spirit override all of those previous ceremonial barriers? What blessings come because of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives today?

4. Do you take for granted the privilege of direct and immediate access to God through the Holy Spirit who dwells in you? How does the Holy Spirit's presence in your life inform the way that you listen for his voice when you read the Bible? How does the Holy Spirit's presence shape the way that you pray to God? What is one way you would seek to grow in your sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's ministry through his indwelling presence?