



THE SPIRIT AND THE END OF THE WORLD

John 15:18-16:15, Acts 4:23-31

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Up until now in our sermon series on the Holy Spirit, we've focused exclusively on the internal, personal ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is appropriate, since that's where the ministry of the Spirit begins in each of us. However, the Bible is the story of God's redemption of the world, and what the Bible teaches regarding the Holy Spirit follows that same story line, such that the trajectory of the Spirit is more outward than inward. We see this in John 15-16, as Jesus transitions from the inward ministry of the Spirit to talk about the Spirit's propelling us out into the world, for the sake of the world.

Beginning with this message, we will talk for the next several weeks about the outward ministry of the Spirit. As we do, I want to draw your attention to the significance of what we're doing here, because it very well may go against the grain of everything you've ever heard about the Spirit. So much contemporary teaching on the Holy Spirit would have us believe that the Spirit is exclusively inward and personal. We are flooded with best-selling books, and podcasts, and small group studies teaching that the Spirit is a private, mysterious force at work within us, improving our self-esteem, helping us chill out and love everybody and lose our inhibitions, giving us energy and enthusiasm, and so on. Out in California, at one of the most influential Spirit-focused megachurches, a pastor there has repeatedly taught that the Holy Spirit is like the genie in Aladdin—"he's blue, and he's funny, and he's sneaky... He's just fun."

To be fair, the Bible certainly does teach that the Holy Spirit can cheer you up and help you feel better. We talked about this previously as we considered the encouragement of the Spirit from John 14. But the Bible does not teach that the Spirit is our fairy godmother. As we'll see throughout the rest of this series, the Spirit leads us out into the world as Jesus' ambassadors. By relegating the Spirit to a narrow, emotional space, either within our own private worlds, or in the confines of contemporary praise and worship, we have grown increasingly oblivious to the world around us, where Jesus has sent us to represent him.

The world is watching and waiting. They're thirsty for Jesus' living water, longing to experience the Spirit's comfort as we have. It's high time that we made this pivot, from inward to outward. As we look at John 15-16, we'll see Jesus make this transition, and we'll begin to learn how the Spirit equips us for the end of the world.

WE'VE BEEN LEFT BEHIND, BUT WE'RE NOT LEFT ALONE

You may have read the Left Behind books or seen the movies. Let me assure you that the Bible does not teach that someday soon, in the twinkling of an eye, Jesus will take all the Christians in the world up to heaven, and only unbelievers will be left behind on earth, at which time all hell will break loose. That's not how the world will end. Rather, here's our story: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." When Jesus returns, "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." That's what the end of the world will look like—not an ending, but an eternal beginning, of abundant life under the reign of King Jesus.

The problem with "End Times" books isn't that they teach we'll be left behind. The problem, rather, is in the timing of it. Because it's already happened.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus promises very plainly that we *will* be left behind. For example, at the beginning of this section of John we've been studying for the past couple of weeks. Jesus says to the disciples, 13:33, "Where I am going you cannot come." He continues to say this in a variety of ways through the remainder of the Gospel of John.

If you've ever read one of those books or watched one of those movies and felt the least bit of fear and anxiety about being left behind, then you know how the disciples felt when Jesus said it to them again and again. John 16:6. "Because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart." They were very sad, and with good reason. They kept saying things like, "You're going to do what?" "No, you can't!" They didn't want to be left behind.

Nevertheless, on Ascension Day, Jesus was lifted up into heaven and seated at the right hand of God. And the truth is that ever since that day, you and I *have* been left behind. Jesus left us all here. And that's perfectly ok. It's one of the very best things that could have ever happened.

"Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." John 16:7.

We like to think how great it would be if Jesus were here today in the flesh. But it wouldn't be, because he wouldn't be able to be in more than one place at the same time. On the first Christmas, the Son of God put on human flesh. He came and lived as one of us, and died for our sins, and on the third day rose again, his body resurrected. He ascended into heaven, bodily. Therefore, we all can't have God the Son, the incarnate Word, living with us all the time. It's humanly impossible. While Jesus is fully God, he's also—still—fully human.

By sending us the Helper, the Holy Spirit, Jesus gave us the best gift of all. His Spirit is with us here, helping us represent Jesus in Washington. At the very same time, the Spirit is with our brothers and sisters everywhere around the world. Day and night, in every place, no matter the language, or culture, or government, the Spirit goes with us into the world.

Yes, we've all been left behind, but we've not been left alone. The gift of the Spirit is a gift of continuity in the ministry Jesus began with his disciples. We carry on in the tradition of the

apostles, enjoying fellowship with the Lord in the power of the Spirit. This gift allows us to continue to be with Jesus, but it's not solely for fellowship; it's also for the sake of mission, that we might spread the love of Jesus throughout the world. Jesus says, "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness." John 15:26-27.

DON'T BE SURPRISED WHEN THE WORLD BEHAVES LIKE THE WORLD

Thus far in our series on the Holy Spirit, we've learned:

1. (From John 3.) The pioneering work of the Spirit enables people to give their allegiance to Jesus and be born again into God's kingdom. This inaugural work of the Spirit is what is elsewhere referred to as the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and it happens to every person who follows Christ.
2. (From John 4 and Ephesians 5.) Christians seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit instead of sinful habits and idols. Jesus invites us to drink deeply from his living water, flowing freely from the Spirit.
3. (From John 14.) Jesus calls us to obey him—something we couldn't do apart from the Spirit. But through the Spirit, we *can* keep our promises, we *can* have victory in the war against sin, we *can* obey the Lord, so help me God.

Now, as we've just learned from John 15, Jesus sent us his Spirit so that we might be his ambassadors in the world. And one would think that with this amazing internal transformation, having become born again, and drinking deeply of the Spirit, and finally having the ability to obey the Lord, that our weary, broken world would welcome us like desperate refugees welcoming in a convoy of humanitarian aid. But sadly, that's rarely what happens. The world is what we once were apart from Christ—blind. In fact, blindness is probably the best way to understand what is meant by the *world* as it is used in John's Gospel. Whereas believers are those who see the Kingdom of God, the world is comprised of those who are blind to the Kingdom of God. And because of their blindness, they will treat us just like they treated Jesus.

Jesus says, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me." John 15:18-21.

As Christians, we are no longer part of the world. And when the world hates us, it's because it hated Jesus first. Recall that some in the world welcomed Jesus, but others killed him. We mustn't think that it will be any different in our case. In fact, Jesus says, "The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God." John 16:2. People like blind Saul of Tarsus will murder Stephen in the name of the Lord. Islamic militants will attack Christians in the Middle East, thinking they're serving the Lord. Why? Because, they're blind. They don't

know the Father, and they don't know Jesus. (John 16:3) Jesus warns us, therefore, to be on our guard, remembering that if the world hates us, it's because it hated him first (John 15:18).

We mustn't be surprised when the world behaves like the world. This is so important, because it makes a tremendous difference in our attitude toward the people around us. Jesus sums up the Old Testament in terms of love of God, and love of neighbor. But it's hard to love our neighbors if we're constantly shocked and offended that they're behaving like non-Christians.

We live in a city of hyper polarization. Many of us are deeply immersed in an antagonistic political climate that breeds name calling and denigration of opponents. We also live in a rapidly changing culture, in which Christian ethics are increasingly maligned as bigotry. There are many, many forces at work here, inclining us to hate those who hate us, and even those who are merely different from us. But we mustn't give in to these pressures. Jesus taught that we must love our enemies and bless those who curse us. In particular, we mustn't look down on them just because they behave like the world.

- We should not be surprised when Islamic militants expel or murder Christians in Iraq, seizing their homes and businesses and property. They are blind.
- We should not be surprised when thieves steal purses during our worship services here. They are blind.
- We should not be surprised when our neighbors, who are of a different faith or no faith, live like reprobates and are aggressively hostile towards us, knowing that we're Christians. They're not *stupid*. They're blind.

We all are blind apart from Christ. No doubt that we *should* know right from wrong. As Paul says in Romans 1-3, we are without excuse for rejecting the truth of God for a lie, but he also says that we have suppressed the truth, and God has given us over to increasing depravity. The world is morally disintegrating because of this. Practically speaking, we don't know right from wrong. We are blind, unless the Lord opens our eyes.

What hope do our blind neighbors have for ever seeing the Kingdom of God? Plenty. Because the Spirit of Jesus lives in us, and we are Jesus' witnesses to them. Some will hate us, some will believe. But regardless of how they respond to us, we shouldn't be surprised or offended whenever the blind act like they're blind.

IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT, AND I FEEL FINE

The ignorance and unbelief of the world is why Jesus came into the world. John says in the prologue of his Gospel that Jesus, the light of the world, came to bring light into the darkness. Consequently, all who encountered Jesus during his ministry in Palestine saw this light.

Without light we cannot see. But when the light comes, we see dirt everywhere—out there in the world, on our neighbors, and, of course, on ourselves. It's not the light's fault that we're dirty. The light simply enables us to see it.

During Jesus ministry in Palestine, everyone he met was exposed by the light. Their dirt was clearly visible, and they were convicted of their sin. Thus, Jesus says, “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.... If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin” John 15:22, 24.

While some believed, others did not, thus confirming what was foretold about Jesus in the Psalms, “They hated me without cause.” (John 15:25) Again, Jesus didn’t make them dirty. He merely shined his light so they could clearly see themselves. They had no right to be angry with him.

Our reception in the world should be no different. Since we now are made ambassadors of Christ and we go out into the world in the power of the Spirit, the same light of Christ should shine forth from us into the darkness. We should expect the same reactions, whether of belief or hatred. In fact, this is exactly what Jesus anticipates in John 16:8ff.

“When [the Spirit] comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.” John 16:8-10.

What Jesus is saying is that in the Spirit-filled ministry of his ambassadors in the world, we should expect that the Spirit will not only convict the world of sin, but also of Jesus’ righteousness, i.e. that he really was the Son of God, the true light, etc. We also should expect that the Spirit will convict the world of judgment, i.e. the *end* of the world. In other words, the Spirit will proclaim Jesus as king, Satan defeated, and death conquered.

This indeed happened, just as Jesus said, when Peter spoke to the crowd on the first Pentecost. In Acts 2:22-36, you can see how the Spirit speaking through Peter first brought conviction of sin, then of Jesus’ righteousness, and finally of the end or judgment of the world. Then in 2:37ff, the crowd responded in repentance and faith, with the result being that some 3,000 people were baptized. For those 3000 people, it was the end of the world, not in terms of a global holocaust, but rather the end of the world’s tyranny in them. Ever since then, as God’s kingdom has expanded in every place, the end of the world has spread, bringing life and light and sight for the blind.

We are sent out in the same way, and we mustn’t be afraid. While many will hate us because of Christ, others will be born again and see the Kingdom of God. As the Holy Spirit goes out and takes up residence in the hearts of others, we have the privilege of witnessing the end of the world in our neighbors. It’s a beautiful thing to behold.

For too long the church in the West has tried to find comfort in the Spirit and escape from the world. But that’s not why Jesus sent us his Spirit. Rather, we must go out into the world in the comfort of the Holy Spirit. Let’s pray that we might be like those first Christians, who turned to the Lord in their fear, and he emboldened them by outpouring his Spirit. “When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” Acts 4:31.