18. PREPARATION FOR SERVICE

_Without me ye can do nothing._—John 15:5.

What preparation does the missionary or the preacher of the Gospel need? We answer this question by asking another: “What preparation did Christ receive for His divine ministry?” I believe that He is our example in all things. “It is,” says Pascal, “one of the great principles of Christianity, that whatever happened to Jesus Christ should come to pass in the souls and bodies of all that are His.”

We die in His death, rise in His resurrection, sit with Him in his session at the Father’s right hand, and when He appears shall appear with Him in glory. It is equally true that we are called to seek, and are promised the same preparation for service which He received.

Now, we observe that Jesus Christ was not in haste to enter on His ministry. He awaited the baptism of the Spirit. And He gave special admonition that His disciples should do likewise.

Several times the disciples and servants of Jesus Christ are spoken of as “sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.” The preparation and seal are the same for Master and servant; and we are to wait this promise of the Father, and to tarry till we be endued with this power from on high.

Now, what is meant by this sealing of the Spirit? “If we
would know what the believer's sealing is,” says John Owen, “let us ask what Christ's sealing was. Jesus Christ's sealing was the gift to Him of the Holy Spirit, to enable Him unto all the duties of his holy calling; and the sealing of believers is the communication of the Holy Ghost, to prepare and furnish them for the ministry.” I take you, therefore, brethren, to the banks of the Jordan, and show you Jesus Christ receiving His great preparation for service in the gift of the Spirit of God.

There, as He came forth from the waters of baptism, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove, and lighted upon Him. The spotless dove which, like that sent forth from the Ark, had found no place of rest for its feet now at last rested, in perfect satisfaction, on the head of the sinless Christ, while a voice from heaven was heard saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” If we turn to Luke’s Gospel we find five things mentioned in connection with this sealing or endowment with power. “Endowment with power,” we say, for let us not forget that though Jesus was the divine Son of God, He wrought and taught in the power of the Holy Ghost from the beginning of His ministry, when He said, “I, by the Spirit of God, do cast out devils,” to the end, when He, “through the eternal Spirit offered up himself without spot, unto God.”

First, He received the witness of Sonship: “This is my beloved Son.” The same testimony is promised to us: “The Spirit witnesseth with our spirits that we are the sons of God.” This I hold to be of very first importance to the minister and the missionary—the assurance of sonship. If we do not know that we are saved, how can we be greatly used in saving others? We cannot lift another higher than our standing ground. Unless we know, on the testimony of God, that we are saved, we lack the very chief preparation for saving others. The first temptation which our Lord encountered in coming forth from His baptism was precisely on this point. Satan met Him with the incredulous question, “If thou be the Son of God . . .” Thus the voice from beneath was heard challenging the voice from above, which said, “This is my Son.” And doubt and fear, unsanctified reason and untrustworthy feeling, are constantly leading us to question, when God’s own voice is clear: “As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the Sons of God.” I believe that if we know our calling as ministers of the Gospel, we shall be of sure of our standing, and then be able to exercise a kind of absolution in dealing with other souls; not priestly absolution—God forbid!—but the absolution of the Word, which is God’s testimony from heaven to everyone that believeth: “These things have I written unto you that believe, that ye may know that ye have eternal life,” says John. And when we have received this testimony, and stand unshaken in it, then are we prepared to confer believing souls and to assure them of their Sonship on the Word and witness of the Lord.

Second, Christ received the fulness of the Spirit at His baptism. “And Jesus, being full of the Holy Ghost, returned from Jordan.”

We are privileged and commanded to be like Christ in this respect, also: “Be not drunken with new wine, wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit.” And if you will carefully read the Acts of the Apostles you will see that this is the preparation for service which the first disciples invariably enjoyed.

Almost every great work or powerful utterance on their part has this as its preface: “And being filled with the Holy Ghost,” they did thus, and spoke thus. This is the lofty ideal set before us: in Christ dwelt all the fulness of the
Godhead bodily. So in that magnificent prayer of Paul, in the Epistle to the Ephesians, we read, “That ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.” Just in proportion as we attain to this high condition shall we have real power with men. To be truly and steadily effective, our service must be an overflow, not an effort. The half-filled servant has to be striving for effect; which is always a source of weakness. So great a preacher as Robert Hall lamented that he was constantly tempted to preach better than he could. If we have the Spirit of the Lord filling us we shall always be greater than our work, and shall have more than we give out. “He that believeth on me, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water. And this he spake of the Spirit which they should receive that believe on him.”

James Brainerd Taylor of blessed memory died at the age of twenty-eight, but in his brief life, and during his college vacations, he did a work for God which any of us might envy. He had waited long with prayer and fasting for the enduement of the Spirit, and he has marked in his Journal the very day when he received and realized its indwelling fulness. Henceforth his life overflowed in extraordinary blessing. His was a labor of love, and not of duty; a life intensely earnest, but wonderfully spontaneous, leading him to beseech men, day and night with tears, to be reconciled to God.

There is a pathetic story told of how one day as he was riding on horseback he stopped to give his horse drink. A young man rode up, and their horses’ heads met at the watering-trough. Young Taylor, filled with the Spirit of God, addressed this young man, and urged him to the salvation of his soul. Though they never met again, the seed thus lodged became the seed of life. That young man was educated in one of our colleges, and went out as a missionary to Africa.

Again and again, he said to himself, “I wish I knew who that young man was who spoke to me at the watering-trough.” One day a package of books was sent him. On opening a little volume, he saw, on the first page, that beautiful, saintly face. Bursting into tears of joy, he exclaimed, “There is the man who first pointed me to Jesus, to whom I owe my being here today as a missionary of the cross.” If God should fill us with the Spirit we would overflow with such love for souls as this. That is the sort of life to be useful. If our ministry is to be a perpetual effort it will be a failure. May God help us to be filled with the Spirit.

Then, third, Jesus “was led by the Spirit into the wilderness.” Who of us does not long for that experience of being divinely led instead of living by some carefully adjusted human pattern? Oh that we might surrender ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Ghost!

The divine life is a twofold life. We have an Advocate with the Father, “Jesus Christ, the Righteous.” But Jesus also said, “I will send you another advocate, even the Holy Spirit, and he shall be in you.” One advocate there, and one here, the love of Jesus displayed in His person on the throne; the Holy Ghost here, shedding abroad that love in our hearts.

Just as He, the Divine Shepherd, goeth before His sheep, leading them out, the Divine Paraclete is within us, leading us on. I recall a hymn which I hold teaches a false theology:—

Holy Spirit, faithful guide,
Ever at the Christian’s side.
PREPARATION FOR SERVICE

The Holy Spirit is never at our side, He is nearer than that; He dwells within us. As we turn to the Acts of Apostles, how beautifully is this divine guidance illustrated: "The Spirit said to Philip, Go, join thyself to this chariot," and he goes, perfectly assured that he is obeying God's voice. When Paul "essayed to go into Bithynia, the Spirit suffered him not." And so, when there was a difference of opinion among the apostles, they held a council, and the verdict was: "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us." This perpetual presence, this wonderful guidance of the Spirit—how greatly we need it, how certainly we may have it. This is the distinguishing privilege of the servant of God, to be moved by an inward impulse instead of being drawn by an outward constraint; to be led by the Spirit instead of being commanded by the law. "As many as are led by the Spirit they are the sons of God," says the Scripture. And the converse is equally true. As many as are the sons of God are led by the Spirit.

Fourth, the power of the Spirit. "Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit." Those of little spiritual discernment often will mistake the power of the intellect for the power of the Holy Spirit, and confound genius with inspiration. But there is a heaven-wide difference. Some literary man has defined genius as "the ability to light one's own fire," that is, a man who can strike off brilliant thoughts from his own brain, without depending on his neighbor, is a genius. But inspiration, or the power of the Holy Ghost in the Christian, is just the opposite. The true preacher knows that he cannot light his own fire, and when he is called to do a great work for God, instead of inciting his intellect, to see how great thoughts he can evolve, he will fall on his face, like Isaiah, and cry, "Woe is me!" till God sends an angel to touch his lips with a live coal from off the altar.

Now, let us remember that Christ's command to us is not "Hurry, and get into your work as soon as possible," but "Tarry, until ye be endued with power from on high"; "Wait for the promise of the Father." It is vastly better that we should not go to our work till next year, if we can go then with the power of God resting upon us, than that we should go this year with only our own power. Some will tell you, indeed, that this special endowment was for the apostles only, not for us. That is man's theory, not God's teaching. We are under the same dispensation of the Holy Ghost as were Peter, and Paul, and John; and whatever power of the Spirit was possible for them is possible for us, if we would only receive it.

There can be no question that the whole tendency of our age is to abandon the supernatural for the natural, and to trust for pulpit success to culture, and logic, and argument, and imagination. Compare the comments on modern preaching which are current with the description of primitive preaching. We say: "Was not that a logical sermon? Was not the rhetoric perfect, and the delivery faultless?"

Compare with this the apostolic test of faithful presentation of truth: "Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance," says Paul. "We preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven," writes Peter. And what was true of the first age of the church ought to be equally true of the present age. Indeed, we may go farther, and assert that often the sermons of the greatest saving and sanctifying power have been those with the least appearance of logical, or literary, or intellectual effort. When the power of the Highest overshadows the preacher he "need
not cry, nor lift up nor cause his voice to be heard in the streets," for it is not any longer he that speaks, but the Holy Ghost that speaks through him.

James Harvey, who began his ministry with great reliance upon his unusual culture and literary accomplishments, tells us of the contrast between this earlier preaching and that of five years later, when through association with Whitefield and Wesley, he had received a new experience of the Spirit. He threw away his ornate and highly wrought literary style. His health, meantime, having become impaired, his bodily presence was weak. But his labor now began to be attended with unwooned success. He contrasts the two ministries by saying that in the first he was like an archer drawing a bow, the speed and momentum of the arrow depending entirely on the strength of his arm; but in the second he was like a gunner discharging his rifle, the force of the ball depending on the power behind it, which the strength of a little finger could release.

I believe, my brethren, that, with all earnestness and perseverance, it is our duty to seek the power of the Holy Ghost upon us. Whether we be preachers at home or missionaries abroad, this must be our chief and supreme reliance.

Fifth, the anointing of the Spirit. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor,” said Christ. The same thing is said of believers: “Now he which hath anointed us is God, who hath also sealed us.”

A theological instructor used to say to us, “Young brethren, whatever you have or have not, do not fail of unction in your preaching.” When we asked him the meaning of unction, he would say, “It is something quite indefinable; but your hearers will know when you have it.” It is indefinable, perhaps, in a sense, and yet the Scripture defines it very clearly. It is nothing less than the presence of the Holy Spirit in the preacher’s heart and in his discourse. “Ye have an unction from the Holy One,” says John, “and know all things.”

Now, all gifts are wrapped up in the gift of the Spirit, and all graces are contained in this grace of His divine anointing. Let me, out of many, mention two:

First, knowledge: “Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and know all things.” “He shall lead you into all truth.” “He shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you.” What is so important for us as that we should know the truth, and should be able to fit the truth to the occasion? The Holy Spirit is the best exegete for drawing out the truth, and the best advocate for pleading the truth.

Why is there such a difference in preachers, when they have the same identical Bible, and, therefore, the same amount of truth?

The difference is in spiritual apprehension. One sees more deeply, and can therefore speak more fully than another. And this depth of insight is entirely dependent on the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Two persons may be traveling together in the same carriage, and may look out upon precisely the same scenery. One is a poet, the other a peasant. But the poet alone is taken up with the beauty of the landscape, and is bursting forth with exclamations of delight. Both have good eyes and the same range of vision; but they are not similar in soul. It is precisely so as we traverse the pages of the Bible. One sees unspeakable things where another sees nothing to admire. The reason is clear. “What man knoweth the things of a man save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so no man knoweth the
things of God, but the Spirit of God. Now, we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God.” I believe that when we have finished our course as ministers our one regret will be that we have known so little of the Word of God, when we might have known so much if we had been more spiritual.

What a blessed consideration, that God has placed His Holy Spirit at both ends of our ministry: in our hearts to show us the truth which we are to preach, in our hearers’ hearts to convince them of the truth which we preach.

But what will our knowledge avail without warmth and sympathy? And this we shall certainly have if we possess theunction of the Holy One. May God forgive us that we have been so cold and formal in uttering God’s truth, when all our souls should have been on fire with it. People will not believe us unless we feel what we say.

A lady went to an eminent English barrister to enlist him in her case. She had taken great pains to arrange in her mind what she would say to him in explanation, and when she detailed her grievances every word was so precise and exact that it seemed to him like a made-up story. In a burst of impatience, he said, “Madam, I don’t believe what you say.” Stung and disappointed at his want of faith in her, she broke forth with a flood of tears, and with every word bursting with emotion, repeated her plea. “Now I believe you,” said the barrister. He was convinced by her feeling, when her rhetoric made no impression on him. Who does not see that more intensity of feeling and less literary exactness and finish is the want of the ministry of our day? We do not wish pocket-handkerchief preachers, indeed, working upon our emotions by emotion which they have worked up in themselves. But oh for more of that divine warmth begotten by the Holy Ghost. The same Comforter,