

7:1 SPRINKLING

Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience. *Hebrews 10:22*

Through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood. *1 Peter 1:2*

When I come in from a long walk or a football game, I'm a bit sweaty and muddy, so I take a shower. The water sprinkles all over my body and I feel washed and refreshed. So it is with our consciences: walking through this world, tangling with its compromises and dodgy practices, can so easily mean we get morally muddied and, in a word, 'unclean'. How can we get pure and clean again?

The answer of the Old Testament is, follow the law of Moses and get 'sprinkled' with the blood of an innocent animal that has died in your place. But this arrangement was never meant to be permanent, because it was only a picture – it could never remove our unfitness for God's presence, however desperately we wished to enter it. There was still a 'No Entry!' sign across God's personal space.

The New Testament declares that the way to God has been well and truly opened by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. This is no symbolic play-acting – it really happened. From now on we can 'take a shower' under the forgiveness that flows from the sacrifice of God's Son. When we trust Christ for cleansing, the Holy Spirit applies the work of the cross to our troubled conscience and we feel relieved and released from the burden of sin and shame.

God promises, 'I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws' (Ezekiel 36:25, 27). The cross removes the 'No Entry' sign; the Spirit says 'Come on in!'

If I do sin, there is the promise of forgiveness (1 John 1:9). 'Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you' (Psalm 116:7 NRSV). Such a relief!

7:2 REFRESHING

Like cattle that go down to the plain, they were given rest by the Spirit of the Lord. *Isaiah 63:14*

Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord. *Peter in Acts 3:19-20 NRSV*

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. *Matthew 11:28*

The wanderings of the children of Israel in the wilderness seem to have been anything but restful. They moaned and groaned, had desperate battles to fight, lost their will to go on, and tried God's patience to the point where he declared, 'They shall never enter my rest' (Psalm 95:11). This may resonate with us at times of stress or resistance to God's will and guidance. We can't seem to find peace.

Yet Isaiah is quite convinced that what he variously calls 'the angel of his presence', 'his glorious arm of power' and 'the Spirit of the Lord' never ceased to be in their midst, redeeming them from slavery, saving them from their enemies, resisting their rebellious moods yes, but 'giving them rest' in his kindness and compassion. If the Old Testament people of God had this experience of the Spirit, shouldn't we who are Christ's friends expect to find it a living reality?

'The Lord is my shepherd ... he refreshes my soul' sang David (Psalm 23:1, 3). Peter may be referring to this Psalm when he drops this little hint into his challenge to his fellow-Israelites. You don't get peace with God by resisting him. You get it by dropping your senseless opposition, coming to the foot of the cross and leaving your burden there for him to deal with. This too is the work of the Spirit. 'This is the resting-place, this is the place of repose' (Isaiah 28:12).

How I need such 'times of refreshing'! But they don't come as a formula, or by pressing emotional buttons. They are the result of his presence, which he has never withdrawn, but which I may need to seek in a deliberate 'returning' to him in faith and penitence. Will I 'come'?

7:3 RECEPTIVENESS

Our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

1 Thessalonians 1:5

One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

Acts 16:14

How does someone get to the point where they simply have to give their heartfelt acceptance to the proclamation of Jesus Christ? Do they have to be 'religious'? Do they need a thorough training in the facts of the Christian faith? Does the speaker need great passion and oratorical skill? Or is it solely the work of the Holy Spirit?

The first person in Europe to believe in Christ was Lydia, an Asiatic business-woman who dealt in the manufacture and sale of purple cloth. She was an expert judge of the quality of this material, in an industry which prided itself on the highest perfection in its goods. She also set herself high standards in her personal life. There were many temptations for a rich woman travelling alone to the Greek cities of Paul's time. She made it her habit to seek out women like herself who believed in a God of goodness, to whom you could pray for strength and guidance. So she joined this little group which met in the cool shade of the Philippi riverside every sabbath.

What precise point did Paul make that 'opened her heart'? Was it the unconditional nature of the gospel? She might accept or reject a purple garment on the basis of its quality, but God's loving invitation to her in Christ was without any conditions. Jesus bore the sins of absolutely everybody, so that absolutely nobody would be disqualified from heaven. You don't have to qualify. Only believe!

The same Spirit who opened Lydia's heart then can do a similar work in me now. I may fail to qualify, but I can choose to believe God's word. Only I can't expect him to let me remain content with who I was. I don't need to pass a quality test – but I do need quality control in his service.

7:4 ASKING FOR WISDOM

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt.

James 1:5-6

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. May your gracious Spirit lead me forward on a firm footing.

Psalms 143:10 NLT

How to find guidance when making important decisions? Astrology, tarot cards, mediums, ouija boards: how reliable are they? In the ancient world, as in some societies today, it would be common practice to consult oracles or witch-doctors. The Delphic oracle in Greece, for example, established a reputation for wisdom even though many of its pronouncements were obscure or misleading.

We sometimes hear Christians testifying to miraculous guidance through opening the Bible at random or hearing a chance word spoken. God may occasionally grant such moments of direct revelation, but they are comparatively rare. James and the Psalmist are describing standard practice. We go to the Lord in prayer confessing our lack of understanding, and we trust him to lead us by his Spirit.

To receive answers to prayer we require not incredible faith, but faith in a credible God who is both 'gracious' and 'generous': gracious in his welcome to us as flawed individuals, and generous in his gifts to us as wannabe followers. The Cross assures our welcome, the Spirit ensures our wellbeing. As long as we sincerely want to know God's will, the path will unfold before us and we won't be led into treacherous swamps or labyrinthine forests.

I tend to treat prayer like a first aid kit, only for use in emergencies. Or I think I've got to feel in close touch with the Lord, otherwise he won't listen to me. Please train me in the use of 'instant' prayer as well as regular meditation on your word. Help me to be more distrustful of my own wisdom, and more accepting of your counsel. 'Teach me to do your will, for you are my God.' Yes and Amen!