

RECEIVE THE SPIRIT

John 20:19-23

Many people over the course of history have struggled with the concept of **ETERNITY**. How can anything go on forever? Well, according to the wisdom, knowledge, and understanding of the human mind, it may be impossible logically to accept the concept because it requires faith. Our minds, as well as our physical abilities, have limits. That is why God is God and we are not. It is far less stressful simply to accept that God exists in a supernatural realm that is far different from the natural realm in which we exist, and that there are many things about Him that we will not be able to understand until we are in Heaven. But some people just cannot be satisfied without receiving specific answers to the things about which they question and wonder. So if you are one of those people perhaps you will be helped by the efforts of some great thinkers who have tried to give us a little clearer understanding of the concept of eternity and eternal life. Here is the first attempt:

“Over the triple doorways of the Cathedral of Milan there are three inscriptions spanning the splendid arches. Over one is carved a beautiful wreath of roses, and underneath is the legend. ‘All that which pleases us is but for a moment.’ Over the other is sculptured a cross, and the words, ‘All that which troubles us is but for a moment.’ But over the great central entrance to the main aisle is the inscription, ‘That only is important which is **ETERNAL**.’¹

Here is another:

“High up in the North, in the land called **Svithjod**, there stands a rock. It is 100 miles high and 100 miles wide. Once every 1000 years a little bird comes to this rock to sharpen its beak. When this rock has been worn away [by this bird sharpening its beak in this way],² then a single day of eternity will have gone by.

¹ Tan, Paul Lee: *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: A Treasury of Illustrations, Anecdotes, Facts and Quotations for Pastors, Teachers and Christian Workers*. Garland TX: Bible Communications, 1996, c1979; “Eternity.”

² Brackets mine.

—Hendrick Willen Van Loon³

And last, but not least, my favorite:

“No matter how large a number is, it is **finite** [having definite or definable limits or boundaries];⁴ it is always possible to mention a number that is larger. Scientists speak of the “**googol**.” It is a one, followed by 100 zeros. The googol is inconceivably large. But then think of the “**googolplexes**” which we believe is **the googol raised to the googol-th power**. It is said, that if this number were written out, there would not be space on earth to contain the pages required. In fact, they would more than fill our galaxy!

—*Christian Victory*⁵

This concept of **ETERNITY** should be of primary importance to all of us. If we are Christians it should be meaningful because in the last verse of this chapter Jesus promises us life forever in a place where we will be happy beyond what we ever could conceive as possible in these earthly bodies. If, for whatever reason, you have not yet come to believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior, the concept of eternity should be of even more importance to you, because what you have in this life is the best it is ever going to get. You see, eternity for you will be how long you live in a place where you will be miserable beyond what you could ever conceive. If you do not believe or you are not sure if you are truly saved by what you believe, you might want to consider seriously your present future. We are available to discuss this with anyone at any time.

NOTHING IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOUR ETERNITY.

Now before we get started we would like to clarify something that is confusing to many people. What is the difference between an apostle and a disciple? “Most New Testament references to **DISCIPLE** designate “*followers*” of Jesus, often a large group including both His closest associates (the twelve) and a larger number of others who accepted His teaching in varying degrees.”⁶

³ Op Cit., Lee.

⁴ Brackets mine.

⁵ Op Cit., Lee.

⁶ Achtemeier, Paul J.; Harper & Row, Publishers; Society of Biblical Literature: *Harper's Bible Dictionary*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985, S. 401.

“In the New Testament the term **APOSTLE** is commonly associated with the special inner circle of Jesus’ disciples, chosen and commissioned by Him to accompany Him during His ministry, to receive His teachings and observe His actions, and to follow His instructions. They are therefore qualified to authenticate His message and to carry on His work through the ministry of the Church.”⁷

Let us now look at what Jesus had to say to His apostles in these final verses of John chapter twenty:

John 20:19-31 NAS:

¹⁹ *So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "**PEACE BE WITH YOU.**"*

²⁰ *And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord.*

²¹ *So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you."*

²² *And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "**Receive the Holy Spirit.**"*

²³ *"If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."*

²⁴ *But **Thomas**, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.*

²⁵ *So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."*

²⁶ *After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you."*

²⁷ *Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing."*

²⁸ *Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"*

²⁹ *Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? **Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.**"*

³⁰ *Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;*

⁷ Ibid.

³¹ *but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.*

This is a very powerful passage of Scripture and well worth studying more carefully.

John 20:19-20 NAS:

¹⁹ *So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "**Peace be with you.**"*

²⁰ *And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord.*

John makes it quite clear that Jesus appears here in the evening of the same day He had risen from the dead. Out of fear of what the Jews might do to them, the disciples had locked the doors. Their fear was not without justification. All we have to do is look back at some of the actions of the Jewish leaders, especially the Sanhedrin, and it is reasonable to understand why these disciples would fear them. They had repeatedly tried to get their hands on Jesus to kill Him and Jesus had warned His disciples that, as His followers, they would also be persecuted. The disciples were probably wondering if they were next in line for scourging and crucifixion.

It is not difficult to understand why they had come back together that evening. For one thing, they probably felt need of the moral support that would come from being in the group, instead of alone as individuals. Then also, there had been so many incredible events that had taken place that day that perhaps they were wondering what to do next. Then, in the blink of an eye, without any of the doors being unlocked, Jesus appeared right before their eyes. It must have been similar to a "*Beam me up, Scotty*" experience. Obviously, the heavenly bodies we will receive at Christ's second coming are very different from the bodies we live in today. Paul explains this more.

1 Corinthians 15:42-44 NLT:

⁴² *It is the same way with the resurrection of the dead. Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die, but they will be raised to live forever.*

⁴³ *Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength.*

⁴⁴ *They are buried as natural human bodies, but they will be raised as spiritual bodies. For just as there are natural bodies, there are also spiritual bodies.*

Philippians 3:21 NLT:

²¹ *He will take our weak mortal bodies and **change them into glorious bodies like his own**, using the same power with which he will bring everything under his control.*

Look at verse 19 of John chapter 20. What is the first thing Jesus offers the disciples when He sees them? He said, "**Peace be with you.**" Jesus had basically told them the same thing earlier in John 14:27 and 16:33. There are two aspects to the peace Jesus is offering.

First is the **peace** that comes from being justified by faith in Jesus Christ, which gives us peace **with** God. At first glance we may not see the depth of the meaning in this greeting.

Jesus had just been removed from the cross where He provided for us to have peace with, and be reconciled to, God by the blood He shed on that cross. Secondly, it is the **peace of God**, which will comfort them. Before He went to the cross Jesus had told His followers: "*I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid (John 14:27 NLT).*" And as He stood there among them He seems to say, "*It is finished I have been through the sorrows of the cross. I have made **PEACE** and now it is yours. Enter into it and enjoy it.*"⁸ The peace that was given to the disciples by Christ was the real thing and it had been purchased at a very high price!

Romans 5:1 NAS:

*"Therefore being justified by faith, we have **PEACE** with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,"*

This is a peace we did not make. It is a peace that Jesus made for us, and which we enter into and enjoy when we believe the truth of the Gospel. We are told, "**He is our peace.**"

Peace in the midst of all the trials of earth. Peace in the day when everything that mankind has counted on is being shaken. But in order to enjoy it, you must receive the One who made it. You must trust Christ for yourself. Can you truly say that you rejoice over the peace that Jesus has given you?⁹

Then Jesus showed them His hands and His side. If they were having any doubts about whether it was really Him, the evidence of the wounds from His crucifixion would have been indisputable proof. You may remember that the nails were driven through His hands

⁸ H. A. Ironside, *H. A. Ironside Commentary – John*, (San Diego, CA: Horizon Press, 1942), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 866-873.

⁹ Ibid.

and the spear had been thrust into His side. They can see therefore that Jesus has a real body. He is not a ghost. It was not only *the spirit* of Christ that had risen from the grave, as many skeptics taught (Docetism), but the body also. This was truly a **BODILY** resurrection.

So here were Jesus' apostles, gathered in His name and suddenly He made Himself visible among them, fulfilling what He said He would do. Even now, though we cannot see Him physically, whenever we are gathered together in His name, He is always right there with us (Matthew 18:20). Why is He in the midst of His friends? In the second chapter of Hebrews He says:

Hebrews 2:11-12 NLT:

¹¹ *So now Jesus and the ones he makes holy have the same Father. That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters.*

¹² *For he said to God, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters. I will praise you **AMONG** your assembled people."*

In order to get the full impact of the importance and meaning of this passage, let us also look at the translation from the *Message*.

Hebrews 2:11-12 MSG:

¹¹ *Since the One who saves and those who are saved have a common origin, Jesus doesn't hesitate to treat them as family,*

¹² *saying, I'll tell my good friends, my brothers and sisters, all I know about you; I'll **JOIN THEM** in worship and praise to you.*

H. A. IRONSIDE phrases this truth of Scripture about as magnificently as anyone could this side of Heaven. Listen to what he says:

“That is one reason He is in our midst when we gather together with fellow Christians. He is in the midst of His saints in order to draw out their thanksgiving and praise. I love to think of Him as the great Choir Leader. These hearts of ours are the instruments with which we make melody to the Lord, and it is He who touches the strings of one heart after another. He is in the midst as our great Intercessor. It is His presence in the midst of the gatherings of His people in the power of the Holy Spirit, that gives each meeting its peculiar character. I think that if we always remembered this it would have a very sobering influence upon us. It would make us realize that in the holy assembly of the saints of God nothing should be done or

said or sung that could not have His approval. Then when we all go Home to glory, He will still be in our midst.”¹⁰

Could you just try to visualize and to feel this in your heart whenever we come together as the body of Christ? Christ is present, even in groups as small as two or three of us. John tells us that he looked up into Heaven and that he saw the throne of God surrounded by the living creatures and the twenty-four elders, representing all the ransomed saints. We need to see that as well. John says:

Revelation 5:6 NLT:

*⁶ Then I saw a Lamb that looked as if it had been slaughtered, but it was now standing between the throne and the four living beings and **AMONG** the twenty-four elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which represent the sevenfold Spirit of God that is sent out into every part of the earth.*

Here we are given a picture of Jesus in Heaven still carrying the marks of His crucifixion on His glorified body, a reminder of all that He suffered for sinners when He died on Calvary's cross.¹¹ And He is still walking among the saints. What a great Man He was, and what a great God He has always been and will continue to be for eternity.

We too will see those marks of His love and when we look upon those pierced hands and upon the wound in His side, they will speak to us and touch our hearts. We will say to ourselves, *"Those wounds tell what He thought of us. He went to that cross of shame and there He received those wounds which tell of a love that was more powerful than death."* And He will bear the scars for all eternity.¹²

You might ask, *"How do you know that He still has those wounds upon His body, that He still bears those scars?"* We know because in Zechariah we read,

Zechariah 12:10; 13:6 NAS:

"And they shall look upon Me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for Him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for Him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn.... And one shall say unto Him, What are these wounds in Thine hands? Then He shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of My friends."

And so those wounds will be an eternal reminder of His love for the Church and His love

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

for Israel. The Church would do well to have the same passion for Jesus. When we gather together as the body of Christ it is for the purpose of being in His presence, and we should never forget that.¹³

Luke provides a good parallel account of this situation that John is describing. Luke's account gives us a little more detail about what went on. The apostles did not immediately rejoice when they saw Jesus. They must have been scared to death when all of a sudden He appeared before them. They may well have thought that He was a ghost.

Luke 24:36-43 NLT:

³⁶ *And just as they were telling about it, Jesus himself was suddenly standing there among them. "Peace be with you," he said.*

³⁷ *But the whole group was startled and frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost!*

³⁸ *"Why are you frightened?" he asked. "Why are your hearts filled with doubt?"*

³⁹ *Look at my hands. Look at my feet. You can see that it's really me. Touch me and make sure that I am not a ghost, because ghosts don't have bodies, as you see that I do."*

⁴⁰ *As he spoke, he showed them his hands and his feet.*

⁴¹ *Still they stood there in disbelief, filled with joy and wonder. Then he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?"*

⁴² *They gave him a piece of broiled fish,*

⁴³ *and **he ate it** as they watched.*

When they finally believed, the disciples saw Jesus as their Lord who had come back from the dead with a new, resurrected, physical body, but a body that is no longer subject to the former laws of physics. This is a body that can accomplish feats such as appearing in a room without coming through a door. Some day we shall have bodies like His and we will be able to spend eternity doing things that the same natural laws of physics do not permit us to do in our present physical bodies.

None of the four gospels gives a complete account of all the appearances of Jesus after His resurrection. One of the reasons for this is that He taught them so much that if everything had been written down no library in the world would have been large enough to hold all the books.

John 21:24-25 HCSB:

²⁴ *This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true.*

¹³ Ibid.

²⁵ *And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which, if they were written one by one, I suppose not even the world itself could contain the books that would be written.*

Luke 24:44-49 HCSB:

⁴⁴ *Then He told them, "These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled."*

⁴⁵ *Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.*

⁴⁶ *He also said to them, "This is what is written: the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead the third day,*

⁴⁷ *and repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem.*

⁴⁸ *You are witnesses of these things.*

⁴⁹ *And look, I am sending you what My Father promised. As for you, stay in the city until you are empowered from on high."*

For forty days Jesus continued working with His disciples, teaching them about the Kingdom of God. He appeared to them on many other occasions other than those mentioned in the Gospels. He taught them all He expected them to do as they went forth as His messengers into all the world.

This group of men had scattered in every direction when Jesus was arrested and then crucified. Now they had regrouped and were hiding together in a secluded room somewhere with the doors locked. Let us now continue in John 20.

John 20:21-23 NAS:

²¹ *So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you."*

²² *And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "**Receive the Holy Spirit.***

²³ *"If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."*

Repeating the greeting, "Peace be with you," undoubtedly had more significance than a casual "How do you do." Jesus may also have had reconciliation in mind here. He wanted them to know that even though they abandoned Him in His darkest hour, they were being forgiven. Now was the time to put the past behind them and prepare themselves for the important things He was about to teach them. The apostles may or may not have detected the subtlety in Jesus' greeting, but **He was about to teach them**

how to preach the gospel of PEACE to all nations.

Jesus had now completed the ministry for which He was sent to earth, and He was about to return to His Father. Therefore, He tells them that by the same authority that sent Him (God), He would send them forth to teach these same truths to the world. He was also giving them the authority to establish and govern His Church.

This was no everyday task. In fact, it was a responsibility that was beyond mere human ability. So Jesus provides them with superhuman power and abilities by giving them the Holy Spirit, which will allow them the ability to accomplish what He is asking of them. He provided them with this gift by breathing on them, an action that represented something very meaningful.

“The term ‘**Holy Spirit**’ refers to the mysterious power or presence of God in nature or with individuals and communities, inspiring or empowering them with qualities they would not otherwise possess. The term ‘*spirit*’ translates in Hebrew (*ruach*) and in Greek (*pneuma*), words denoting ‘wind,’ ‘breath,’ and, by extension, a life-giving element. The reference here is to the divine spirit, i.e., the Spirit of God.”¹⁴

Jesus’ statement here brings to mind the act of Creation. In the Creation God **breathed into Adam the breath of life**, Genesis 2:7 (NASB): “*Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.*”

Christ breathed the Holy Spirit of God into His apostles to illustrate that the Holy Spirit proceeds (comes from) the Father (God) through the Son (Jesus). In John 15:26 (NAS), the apostle writes: “*When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me.*”

What is the relationship between John 20:22 and the later coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 at Pentecost? There were two events involving the sending of the Holy Spirit. This event where the apostles were given the Holy Spirit was for the private benefit of the apostles to whom Jesus was assigning responsibility for the Church. There was later at Pentecost a **public empowering** of the Holy Spirit that affected thousands of people, and apparently included the apostles as well.¹⁵ We see in Luke 24:49 that Jesus told them to wait until the public empowering of the Holy Spirit. They must have needed something further from the Holy Spirit before they were complete.

¹⁴ Achtemeier, Paul J.; Harper & Row, Publishers; Society of Biblical Literature: *Harper's Bible Dictionary*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985, S. 401.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Verse 23 has been a difficult passage to understand. Roman Catholics have used the verse in John 20:23, along with Matthew 16:19, to support the authority of the priest in the confession booth to forgive sins. Yet the two great Jesuit scholars who have written commentaries on John, Brown (1970:1030-1031) and Schnackenburg (1982:3.326-328) both admit that the meaning here is the proclamation of the Gospel—that is, the Church in mission.¹⁶

The question in John 20:23 is whether Christ is giving authority to His apostles to make a choice either to forgive or not forgive the sins of other people. On the other hand Jesus might be in effect saying that if people accept the teaching of the apostles, repent of their sins, and accept Christ as their Savior, then their sins are forgiven. Knowing the sinful nature of mankind, it does not seem probable that God would allow such fragile creatures the divine responsibility and involvement of forgiving the sins of anyone. God alone can forgive sins (Mark 2:7; Isaiah 43:25).

Because of the temptations that bombard us each day, and considering the number of times even the most righteous of men and women succumb to those temptations, no human being is capable of either forgiving or not forgiving the sins of anyone else. The pastor or minister, however, is entrusted by God to counsel those who seek after salvation. It is his or her responsibility to advise the person of just what the Scripture has to say about salvation and the forgiveness of sins and to offer each person God's forgiveness and salvation.

So the question each of us is left with today is, "Am I a fitting witness for Christ? In this season of Lent, am I carrying the message of the truth of Christ's life, death, and resurrection to those around me? Am I filled with the Holy Spirit and showing others the power of God by living a transformed life?" Christ's resurrection empowered the apostles to preach the Gospel. Christ's resurrection can empower us to live holy lives that give others a desire to know Christ personally. Is mine such a life?

¹⁶ Philip W. Comfort, ed., *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary – Volume 13: John and 1-3 John*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2007), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 282-283.