

## THE POWERS OF THE AGE TO COME

### *The Holy Spirit and the Righteousness of the New Age*

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#### **What does the Holy Spirit bring?**

Hebrews 6:4–5 speaks of those to whom the Holy Spirit has come:

*those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.*

What are these 'powers of the age to come'? Are they some performance-enhancing super-additive that enables us to have more advantageous control in our lives, or even some miracle-working abilities? Comic book characters such as Mandrake the magician, and Superman, and fantasies such as Jonathan Livingstone Seagull, have wide appeal for those who feel weak or powerless, and who would like to have more control in their own lives and the lives of others. Do these 'powers of the age to come' bring us to a level of 'spirituality' that sets us apart from others who are caught up in the ordinary and humdrum things of this world, and enables us to escape to a higher, more 'spiritual' plane? Is that what the Holy Spirit brings? Or does the Spirit of God have something else in view?

*What do we understand is meant by 'the powers of the age to come'?*

In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul the apostle speaks of the access the Spirit gives us to 'God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory' (1 Cor. 2:7):

*as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him'—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God ... we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God (1 Cor. 2:9–10, 12).*

If we are among those who love God, then this affects us very personally and directly. We have a sense of things that are beyond our comprehension, which have to do with 'our glory' from God in the time to come. This is in contrast to 'the spirit of the world', where independent personal advantage is high on the agenda ('all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world', 1 John 2:16).

#### **New heavens and a new earth**

If the Spirit of God enables us to taste 'the powers of the age to come', what is the nature and quality of the 'age to come', to which these powers pertain? Peter characterises it as follows:

in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home (2 Pet. 3:13).

Fuller descriptions are given in Isaiah 65:17–25 (compare 11:1–10) and Revelation 21:1–22:5 (compare 7:9–17). Common to these descriptions is that this is the dwelling-place of God and of His Messiah, with God's people, and the arena of their ultimate action. All causes of grief, sorrow and pain, namely all sin and its accompanying death, will have been overcome and removed, and will have no place there. All that is found there is righteousness: the righteousness that is from God. For this is the time when 'the earth shall be filled with [the knowledge of] the glory of the LORD' (Num. 14:21; Hab. 2:14; compare Isa. 11:9). It is of this that the Holy Spirit gives us a foretaste.

### **The righteousness of God**

If this is to be our home and sphere of operation, it is as well for us to know what this righteousness is, and how it relates to us. This righteousness—there is in fact no other—is the way God is, in all his ruling actions and judgments, forever (see e.g. Psa. 48:10: 'Your right hand is filled with righteousness'; 97:2: 'righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne'; 96:13: 'He will judge the world with righteousness'; 111:3: 'his righteousness endures forever'; see also Deut. 32:4). Psalm 36:6 says that God's righteousness is 'like the mighty mountains'. All that God is and does is right and good.

Made in God's image, we have been created by God to participate with God in His righteousness. This comes, and has always come, through being in a relationship of faith and dependence with God (Hab. 2:4; Gal.3:11; Heb. 10:37–39: 'The one who is righteous through faith will live'; compare Heb. 11:2, 6; Rom. 14:23: 'whatever does not proceed from faith is sin'). This is exemplified in the one true human being, Jesus Christ. John the Baptist said: 'No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven' (John 3:27); and Jesus claimed no righteousness of his own but only that which came from the Father (Mark 10:18: 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone'; see also John 8:28, 46). In the beginning this would have been natural and unselfconscious for us all, written on our hearts (as in Rom. 2:14–16).

This we rejected and defied when we sought to become our own authority as to what is right and wrong, apart from and over against God (see Gen. 3:1–6), and so sought to establish our own self-righteousness, which is not righteousness at all but unrighteousness opposed to the righteousness of God. God's opposition to all that is not His righteousness then came into play: 'the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth' (Rom. 1:18). God later spelled out His righteousness in so far as it concerns us in His law (Psa. 119:172 *NKJV*: 'all Your commandments are righteousness'). This had the effect on the whole of showing up what we are not as sinners, and of bringing us under condemnation for it (Rom. 3:20; 8:2: 'through the law comes the knowledge of sin ... the law of sin and of death'). One perverse response to that is to take this law of God and seek to implement it ourselves, apart from the necessary faith-relationship with God, in a vain attempt to establish our own self-righteousness (as in Rom. 10:3–4: 'For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes').

## **God's justifying righteousness**

In the face of this, God's purpose from the beginning was that His righteous, ruling, saving action would come to us in His Son Jesus, to bring us back to the relationship of faith, and take us on to the 'new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home'. This happened when Jesus, in obedience to the Father (John 10:17-18; 14:31), in the power of the Spirit (Heb. 9:14), identified with us in total love, and in the place that was deservedly ours, took into himself our sins and God's wrath with their fatal consequences, on the cross, and finished them there for us, and rose to eternal life as the first-fruits of the human race. In him, God's righteousness is full and free, unsullied and undeterred, for us all (1 Pet. 3:18: 'For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring us to God'; 1 Cor. 1:30: 'whom God made ... our righteousness' *RSV*; 2 Cor. 5:21: For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God').

## **Justification and the Spirit of God**

The Spirit of God, actively engaged with the Father and the Son in this whole mighty act of salvation, is instrumental in bringing us through to it. Primarily in view is the righteousness of the age which is coming, in which we participate:

*For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness (Gal 5:5).*

This hope is sure, because the Spirit has already applied the work of the cross to our lives. After telling us that Jesus our Lord 'was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification' (Rom4:25), Paul goes on to say:

*hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:5-6).*

This justification and reconciliation with God in Christ now gives us confidence as we look towards the time when we will be 'saved through him from the wrath of God' and when we will be 'saved by his life' (Rom. 5:9, 10). Even now, we know in our experience by faith:

*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).*

This secures us in God's righteousness now, for the day of resurrection—our entry into the new heavens and new earth where righteousness dwell:

*But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you (Rom. 8:10-11).*

## According to the Spirit

This means we are now to live according to the Spirit, and not according to the flesh, the world and the devil which remain opposed to God on their own trail to destruction:

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want (Gal. 5:16-17).

Christ, and the justifying righteousness from God that has come to us in him, is to be our whole concern:

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith (Phil. 3:8-9).

We renounce godless self-serving and self-righteousness, because we already belong to the 'new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home', where our salvation is secured:

For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself (Phil. 3:18-21).

This means that we will now live in righteousness, in anticipation of that day:

And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him ... And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 2:28-29; 3:3).

This will be something very different from seeking to enhance our own powers and control in our own life and in the lives of others (which is the very problem that Jesus has rescued us from!). Rather, our whole focus will be naturally to be servants of God and of one another, with all the gifts of the Spirit that come our way:

he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them (2 Cor. 5:15).

through love become slaves to one another (Gal. 5:13).

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ... (Phil. 2:3-5).

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received (1 Pet. 4:10).

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Note:

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