Martyn Lloyd-Jones on Ephesians and the Spirit

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his book has certainly several chapters on Ephesians 1:13, which goes, “In whom also after that ye believed ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise,” and we have the RSV translation, “In him you also...were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.” In connection with that, he starts this way: “We have dealt with this subject at this length because it seems abundantly clear from the New Testament and from the long history of the Christian Church, that there is nothing which is so essential from this standpoint of Christian witness and testimony as this experience of sealing.”

Now remember, this is Doctor Martyn Lloyd Jones, the ex-medical surgeon, the man who preached for years in the center of London at Westminster Chapel. He is regarded by all conservative Evangelicals in England, and I would presume America also, as one of the chief and most reliable expositors of God’s word. And as a very balanced, intelligent, cold, calculating man who was trained scientifically and carried that detailed analysis of scripture into his preaching. He’s not thought of in any way as anywhere near a Pentecostal, and always thought of as someone who would deal with this kind of subject very much down the middle of the road.

So I went to his book really thinking, “He’ll be very good on Ephesians, and it'll be good just to see what he says, and then to go to my own explanation as I preach on Ephesians.” But I really didn’t expect this kind of presentation on the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I did begin to suspect a little he could take a different viewpoint than I expected, when he quoted several experiences of men actually in his own tradition. I don’t know if you know much about Jonathan Edwards, but Jonathan Edwards is looked upon as a very strong Calvinist, and a very strong scriptural expositor -- but not at all as a man who is favorable towards the kind of emphasis on the Holy Spirit that God has shown us. But he tells of Jonathan Edwards’ experience.

“Jonathan Edwards describes the same experience as follows, ‘Once as I rode out into the woods for my health in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view that for me was extraordinary of the glory of the Son of God as mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure, and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condensation. This grace that appeared so calm and sweet appeared also great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent, with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception, which continued near as I can judge about an hour -- which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears and weeping aloud.”

I just didn’t think that Lloyd-Jones would even use that kind of example. He quotes Wesley’s experience, and then he quotes Edwards, and then another Puritan. So it’s with that background he says about Moody, “Let us now turn to a very different man, DL Moody, who was not a philosopher and nor in any way a great intellect. He writes, ‘I began to cry as never before. The hunger for this increased. I really felt that I did not want to live any longer if I could not have the power for service. I kept on crying all the time that God would fill me with his Spirit. Well one day, in the city of New York, oh what a day! I cannot describe it. I seldom refer to it. It is almost too sacred an experience to name. I can only say that God revealed himself to me and I had such an experience of his love that I had to ask him to stay his hand.’"
So it’s those kinds of examples that he has used. We then find him going on and making this point that there is nothing which is so essential from the standpoint of Christian witness and testimony as this experience of sealing. Maybe you didn’t go to Westminster Chapel, but I should explain to you the atmosphere in that place, because Irene and I before we went to America were in London. We went there not many Sundays but a few Sundays, because I heard about Martyn Lloyd-Jones through our fellowship conferences. And as we went in, we were very aware that these were the most professional of the Londoner’s going in. In those days, you could tell this guy is a lawyer; this gal is a teacher; this guy is a businessman. So you had a real feeling that these were thoughtful, intelligent, reflective, and analytical people.

Then you got in and it had two balconies, and the whole place was full. There was an organ playing but no great choir. Then this little bald-headed man, with the kind of gown I wore as a teacher, comes in and sits down, and we sing a hymn and he prays – forever -- and then we sing another hymn, and then he stands up and he virtually reads the whole sermon. He goes in detail for about 15 minutes over what they did last Sunday, because he was at that time not expounding Romans, but I think it was Philippians. But it was verse-by-verse, and he just virtually read the sermon. He would look up at times, because he obviously had lectured at university at some time in his life. But he would virtually read the sermon. Of course, it was great, very detailed exposition of God’s word. So that was the kind of background that you have and that’s the people that he delivered this to.

So it’s maybe good to remember that he had plenty of people there that were very --don’t even use the word Pentecostal -- were very skeptical of anything that wasn’t strict Orthodox Evangelical Christianity. He said, “There’s nothing which is so essential from the standpoint of Christian witness and testimony as this experience of sealing. It is possible to witness in a mechanical manor, but that has very little value. Only those who know this sealing are really effective witnesses. That is why our Lord told his disciples to stay at Jerusalem until they had received it. It is not only the highest experience a Christian can ever have, it is the way to make us effective as Christians, to make us alive and radiant. This is proved in every period of spiritual wakening.”

Now we would never have thought of that coming from Martyn Lloyd-Jones. And I think John Stott would not stand in the same place, even though he regards Lloyd-Jones as his mentor. So with that I’d like to go to what I thought was an important emphasis that he brings out. Lloyd-Jones says, “The remaining question which many ask is, ‘Are we to seek this sealing?’ My answer, without any hesitation, is that we should most certainly do so. As we must be careful about the way in which we should seek it. It is wise to start with a negative.”

“There is nothing in contemporary Christianity which is so dangerous and so unscriptural as the teaching that with regard to each and every blessing in the Christian life, all that we have to do is to take it by faith and not worry about feelings.”

I would have said, “That’s what all your congregation will say, Martyn.” I couldn’t believe it, because this man with his medical background obviously had done courses in psychology. So it was natural for him then to do a fair bit of counseling. He was known as a very sharp guy in psychology. So I should read it again, “There is nothing in Contemporary Christianity which is so dangerous and so unscriptural, as the teaching that with regard to each and every blessing in the Christian life, all that we have to do is to take it by faith, and not worry about feelings.”
Now he’s not saying faith has no place. But you can hear him yourselves: “This is taught with regard to conversion, sanctification, assurance, and physical healing. Dreadful tragedies have happened in every one of these realms as the result of such teaching. Let me give certain examples.” Of course what kills you is he hits your heroes!

“The late gifted Andrew Murray of South Africa, at one time was a great believer in what is called faith healing, and he taught it in the manner which we are criticizing. If a Christian were taken ill, he should read the scriptures, and believe their teaching to be that is it God’s will for a Christian to be always healthy. He should then go to God and tell him that he believed the scriptures and this particular teaching, and then ask him for healing. But the vital point was that he should get up from his knees believing that he had already been healed. The fact that he did not feel better made no difference. He must take his healing by faith and proceed to live his life as if he were perfectly well.”

Now we should be very clear, he is not at all saying that you should not believe that God has already done everything in Jesus and in his death that is needed to be done. He’s not saying that. That is the basis of faith. But he’s saying that there’s a place for that faith experience being manifested in your present life by the Holy Spirit. And of course there are those who are just absolutely coldly intellectual about it. They say, “No, I just believe it in my head, and I have no experience of it in my life. But that’s OK. I’ll just keep going.” That’s what he’s fighting against. “The fact that he did not feel better made no difference. He must take his healing by faith and proceed to live his life as if he were perfectly well. But there came a time when Andrew Murray ceased to believe after this fashion, and his biography explains how this happened.”

“He had a favorite nephew who was suffering from a certain chest complaint,” probably tuberculosis. “Andrew Murray was due to go on a series of preaching meetings in a certain part of South Africa and the nephew was anxious to go with him, but in his ill condition he was not fit to go. The two men believed the same teaching about healing by faith and they both went on their knees together and asked God for healing. They rose to their feet both believing that the young man was healed. They packed their bags and went off together, but they had only been away for a short time when the young man died.” This is quite interesting, so I’m not asking you to be blown away with this, but I’m asking you to take these words into consideration -- just as you continue to think about God and you beginning to approach him, about this.

“Let us be clear in our minds then, that we do not receive this blessing in that way, and apart from feelings. When we are sealed with the Holy Spirit of God we shall know it. It is not to be accepted by faith, apart from feelings. You must go on asking for it until you have it, until you know that you have it. The teaching of take it by faith is responsible, I believe, for much of the present undesirable state of the Christian church. Many seem to go through the entire course of the Christian life in that way, saying, ‘We do not worry about our feelings. We take it by faith,’ with the result that they never seem to have any experience at all. They live on what they suggest to themselves. It is a kind of odd autosuggestion or kooaism.” I don’t know what “kooaism” is, but it’s presumably some philosophy of positive thinking.

“But when God blesses the soul, the soul knows it. When God reveals his heart of love to you, your own heart is melted by the experience. The Apostles and others who were filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost were radiant, taken up above and beyond themselves, and they spoke with an amazing authority and assurance, and all who saw and heard them were amazed and asked, ‘What means this?’ Let us be careful lest we rob ourselves of some of God’s riches blessings.”
“When God seals you with the Spirit, you will know it. You will not have to take it by faith irrespective of your feelings and your condition and simply keep on saying, ‘I must have had it because I believe. I have taken God’s word for it.’ You will not have to persuade yourself. The persuasion will be done by the Holy Ghost, and you will know something of this rejoicing with a joy unspeakable and full of glory. I am not suggesting however, that we should indulge in what have been sometimes called tarrying meetings.”

Now I don’t know if you’ve heard of that, but when I first came into the reality of the Holy Spirit, the old Methodists would talk about tarrying meetings, which were really close to prolonged altar calls. They would go on and on. I certainly myself have been involved in altar calls that have gone on until three or four o’clock in the morning. I’m not saying that that’s all wrong, but that’s what he’s talking about -- tarrying meetings.

“There was a sense in which those who started such meetings were right. At any rate they realized that such a policy was something experimental.” Experimental -- something that you experienced. “But they were wrong when they went on to say, ‘Let us meet together, and let us wait until we have had the blessing we seek.’” And there’s that demand upon God in that -- that is not the submissive absolute faith in God’s sovereignty, and his power to do it.

“They were wrong when they went on say, ‘Let us meet together, and let us wait until we’ve had the blessing we seek.’ They would wait for days and sometimes weeks with the result that time and again, certain unfortunate results tended to follow. This was more or less inevitable, as they were creating certain psychological conditions. If people wait in that manner without food and drink and in an intense atmosphere, there is always an enemy on hand who is ready to produce a counterfeit.”

I think that might help some of us who wonder, “Well what about some strange things that we know happen?” He’s certainly very aware of counterfeits and the pretence of Satan to produce things. “And there is always our own psychology, the power of persuasion, and the danger that people may work themselves into a false ecstasy. This danger became especially real when they said, ‘I will not go out of the building until I have the blessing.’” Well, you kind of almost feel, “God I’m holding you ransom,” and it doesn’t seem to me the attitude of the suppliant to the Father.

“Furthermore, there is the very real matter of the sovereignty of God. It is he who decides when to give this blessing. It is he who decides whom to give it. We cannot command it, and we must never adopt the attitude of saying, ‘I am going to fulfill the conditions and wait until it has happened.’” Because of course, that’s creating the idea that this is a mechanical thing: “If I fulfill the conditions it’ll happen.” Whereas it’s not this -- it’s a relationship with the dear Savior himself. It’s our Savior. This is our friend we’re talking to. This is his blood that we’re asking for. It’s not put the penny in the machine and blood comes out. This is our Savior’s blood – the life of his Holy Spirit.

“That is unscriptural. It is not God’s method. He certainly told the disciples to tarry at Jerusalem until the Day of Pentecost, for he had determined on that particular day, as he had revealed already in the Old Testament, to the Old Testament saints, but it supplies no precedent for tarrying meetings.” In other words he’s saying, “God had determined to give the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. That’s why he gathered the disciples together in that way, and that’s why he told them to wait, because it was God himself telling them.” But it’s different from us telling ourselves, “We’re going to wait until he gives it to us.”
“What then should we do? Let me summarize the answer. Search the scriptures. Search the scriptures for the promises, those exceeding great and precious promises of which the Apostle speaks. Realize what God means you to have, and what he offers you.”

“In the third chapter of our Ephesians epistle, Paul says that he is praying for his friends, ‘that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge.’”

“You and I are meant to know something about this love of Christ, which passeth knowledge. Do you know it? You are meant to know it. So I say, read the scriptures, and as you read the scriptures say, ‘That is meant for me. I am meant to know that Christ loves me in that manner. I believe it but I have never known it. I have never experienced it. But I am meant to do so.’ Then go on to say, ‘I should have this. I ought to know this.’ That will stimulate you to pray.”

“The next principle is: make sure you are seeking the right thing. We are not to seek experiences and phenomena as such. We are to seek the Lord, to seek to know him and his love. It is almost insulting to him to seek his blessings and not to seek him. He has done all this for us in order that we might know him, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent. Seek him. Seek the knowledge of him. Seek his righteousness. Seek his holiness. Seek all these and you will never go astray. But if you seek ecstasies, and visions, and feelings, you will probably have them, but they will be counterfeit. Seek him and you cannot go wrong.” Of course some of this is old stuff to us, because God has been good enough to teach it to us plainly.

“The next step is to do all that we can to prepare the way. ‘Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth,’ Colossians 3:5. We must be cleansed, and must cleanse ourselves if this lovely guest is to enter in. Mortify therefore your members. Get rid of sin. Purify your hearts. ‘Get rid,’ says Paul, ‘of all filthiness of the flesh and of the spirit.’ ‘Purify your hearts, you double-minded,” says James. Then take Peter’s advice in the first chapter of his second Epistle, ‘Add to your faith virtue,’ and so on. ‘The man who fails to do this is short sighted,’ says Peter. He does not see afar off. He does not realize that he was purged from his old sins. But if you do these things you will make your calling and election sure, and an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We must concentrate on making our calling and election sure.”

“Then positively, as we have seen, we are to put into practice the virtues which the Apostle Peter mentions in detail, ‘Add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity (love).’ Peter exhorts to do these things. He does not merely say, ‘Go to a meeting and wait for it, or receive it by faith.’ We have to furnish out our faith, to fill it out with these other things. We are to labor at it, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

It’s much of what we have shared -- the need to ask the Holy Spirit to show you, “Is there any way in which I’m not fully surrendered to you? Is there any way in which you are not able to enter me, because of some attitude I have?” It’s full consecration.
“If you read the lives of the great men of God, whose experiences I have quoted, you will find that they all follow these injunctions. They were all men who labored in reading the scriptures and trying to understand them. They purified their lives by self-examination and mortification of the flesh. As you read the biographies of Whitfield, Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards, and John Fletcher of Madeley, and others, you will find that all these men gave themselves to spiritual exercises. They did not take it by faith, and persuade themselves that they must have received it. They gave themselves to seeking God.”

All of this of course leads invariably to prayer. “You must pray for this blessing. I like Thomas Goodwin’s word here. ‘Sue him for it,’ he says. ‘Sue him for it.’ ‘Give him no rest,’ as Isaiah says.”

“I know of no better prayer to offer than that found in one of the hymns of William Williams, the Welsh hymn writer, which has been translated thus:

‘Speak I pray Thee, gentle Jesus!
O, how passing sweet thy words,
Breathing o’er my troubled spirit
Peace which never earth affords.

All the world’s distracting voices,
All th’enticing tones of ill,
At Thy accents mild, melodious,
Are subdued, and all is still.”

Tell me Thou art mine, O Savior,
Grant me an assurance clear;
Banish all my dark misgivings,
Still my doubting, calm my fear.

O, my soul within me yearneth
Now to hear Thy voice divine;
So shall grief be gone forever,
And despair no more be mine.”

Interesting to hear an old Welshman go to one of his countrymen!

“That is the way. Offer up that prayer to him, until he has answered it. ‘Tell me thou art mine, O Savior, grant me an assurance clear.’ Has he granted you that request? Has he whispered to you? Has he spoken to you? Pray for his blessing. Seek it. Be desperate for it. Hunger and thirst for it. Keep on praying until your prayer is answered. Take time, in other words. Take time, not only take time to be holy, but take time to seek this sealing with the Spirit. Keep on, never cease, and your experience one day will be, ‘Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings; it is the Lord who rises with healing in his wings.’”

“This may well happen when you least expect it. The lives and the testimonies of the saints throughout the centuries are agreed in saying that God tends to do this for us at certain special times. Sometimes when a man has to go through a very great trial God gives him this blessing just before the trial comes. How kind is our God! What a loving Savior! What a loving Father. When he
knows that something is about to happen to you that will test you to the very depth of your being, he grants you this blessed assurance so that you can go through the trial triumphantly. It may happen after a period of apparent desertion, sometimes after a time when the fig tree was not blossoming and all the trees were bare, when all had gone wrong. Suddenly the light breaks, and he speaks and he whispers his love to us, and gives us the white stone with a new name, and feeds us on the hidden manna.”

“Many Christian people have only known this just before their death, and they have agreed in saying that it was their own ignorance that prevented their receiving it earlier. They had not sought it as they should of done. They were good men. They had lived the Christian life. They had even been used of God. But they had never heard his accents mild melodious. He had never whispered in their hearts. Their desire for the blessing had been too spasmodic. They had not longed for it and sought it as they should of done.”

“But face-to-face with the end they have sought it with a new intensity and he has heard them, and spoken to them. There are many such Christians. God has granted them this blessed direct assurance just before he took them to himself forever. So I say again: seek it. Be satisfied with nothing less. Has God ever told you that you are his child? Has he spoken to you, not with an audible voice, but in a sense in a more real way? Have you known this illumination, this melting quality? Have you known what it is to be lifted up above and beyond yourself? If not, seek it, cry out to him, saying, ‘Speak I pray thee gentle Jesus,’ and sue him for it, and keep on until he speaks to you.”

I thought it was remarkably strong and clear in its emphasis – in his emphasis on a definite experience, and you know yourself best where you stand. It seems to me the only basis on which we can do anything is the strong firm basis that we have stated. This is incredible, but God, out of his great graciousness whether we enter into this or not, he has created us in his Son. He has borne with us, and he will take us to himself in his Son -- because that’s what we ourselves believe. So he is so kind. He will take us at the end to himself whether we enter into this or not, but what Lloyd-Jones of course is making very clear is that there is a time when God wants us to draw close to him, and to experience that.

He has one little illustration that might express it in a different way. He talks about a father and a son, and talks about how they were quite close to each other, but then the son did something wrong. “There is a very beautiful illustration of this aspect of the truth in the words of the saintly, the heavenly,” Doctor Richard Sibbes, another of the great Puritans of 300 years ago. “Doctor Sibbes says that the difference between the conversion experience and the sealing can be stated thus: ‘It is like a child who has been a little mischievous and disobedient, who has a sense of guilt and is unhappy, and who keeps on running back to his father. The father receives him but he does not smile much at him. This is the father’s way of reprimanding him, and of punishing him for his disobedience. But the child by running back gets a certain satisfaction when he is with his father.’”

“This may go on for some time. Then one day as they’re walking along a road together, the child presses near to his father and touches him. The father continues just to look at him, but then after a while the father takes hold of the child, lifts him up and fondles him in his arms, and showers his love upon him.’ That is the difference. Without the sealing of the Spirit you can know that your sins are forgiven, but not in this special and certain manor. This goes beyond the initial experience of forgiveness. This is God, if I may so express it, endearing us and showering
his love upon us -- overwhelming us.”

So it’s something dear, and it’s a privilege, and it’s something precious that our Father has for us. It’s not something that we have to beat ourselves into or threaten ourselves with damnation if we don’t enter into it. But it is something precious that God has for us. And it seems that’s the way we should seek it. This is our dear and loving Father, who wants us, really along the lines of this morning’s presentation, to experience the reality of the position that he has given us next to his heart in his own dear Son. And really, what is being asked of each of us tonight is, have we an experience of that closeness to him? Have we felt overwhelmed by his love? Let’s pray.