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Sermon preached by Mr J K Popham
at Galeed Chapel Brighton
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JOHN 6 v 63

"It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh
profiteth nothing: The words that I speak
unto you, they are Spirit and they are life"

In their stretch, their meaning, their spirituality, their ultimate comfort and blessedness, these words are far beyond the stretch of imagination. They are penetrating, discriminating; they are a divine commentary upon the teaching of the chapter. They separate between flesh and spirit. Implicit in them is good news from a far country; that Scripture in Corinthians - "Eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him". The text is truly a very great Scripture; it was a great reproof to the carnal hearers of Christ who had made to themselves a shuddering interpretation of His blessed word - "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood ye have no life in you". And He tells them what, if they had ears to hear, would at once have corrected that interpretation. Having said, you must eat My flesh, you must drink My blood, or be dead, He says - "What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where He was before?" What if - in spite of all you think and what you are murmuring now in your hearts - ye shall see Me, who am very man and also true Almighty God, ascend up to heaven where, in My divine Person, I was before I became incarnate? What if you shall see Me ascend into heaven where I go, carrying with Me all My infinite merit, carrying with Me My people? As if He should say also to them, why do you do interpret, misinterpret My words? It is the spirit of them that is to be regarded; the flesh profiteth nothing. My flesh, if it were alone and not united to eternal Deity, would profit nothing; could be of no use or value to any. The flesh profiteth nothing. It is the Spirit that I speak, the Spirit that I possess, the Spirit who shall teach you, the Spirit who shall be in you, He it is who profits, and the words that I speak, they are spirit to whomsoever they come. They are life, they are full of instruction.

It is great to be led into the spirit of the Scriptures; to be led to see in the Scriptures Almighty God, where reason can only see a man and be offended with Him; to see the spirit of the word which insists on the reception of Christ or, lacking that, on death reigning. To those in whom that death reigns, Christ means nothing. Human nature shudders at that separating truth, but grace makes a man love it. To the believer Christ's words mean really the blessed reception of Himself into the heart by faith; a believing reception of Himself into a believing heart; a broken heart receiving a broken Saviour. Let us look as enabled then at this word. "It is the Spirit that quickeneth". An allusion may be here to Adam's creation. God gathered the dust of the ground, made it into a human body, and then breathed into it the breath of life and Adam became a living soul, and our progenitor communicates to all his children his Adam life, life indeed from a fallen Adam, but still Adam life. We are dead, spiritually dead. The Scripture is most awfully true - "Dead in trespasses and sins". This is true of God's people before regeneration, and here the flesh can profit nothing. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh", remains flesh, can only do according to the flesh, produce fruits of its own kind, do works after its own nature, and never rise above itself. It is flesh, remains flesh. Melt it by a sort of trouble, dissolve it by a kind of conviction, run it into a mould of religion if you will, but it remains flesh. You can make nothing better of it. Humbling truth this; mortifying truth this. What man does not rebel against it? What man is willing that all his running and willing should be counted nothing? "So then it is not of him that willeth nor of him that runneth". O how offended I was in my youth with that Scripture. How unjust I thought it of God. If you mix flesh and spirit which you will, if you are ignorant of the eternal distinction that there must be between human nature and the Spirit of God, until the Spirit comes and rules in the soul you cannot be reconciled to so excluding, so cutting a truth as that, that God wont receive your running, wont look kindly on your willing, because both of them are from the flesh. But if the Spirit quickens then you will in another way, and run in another way, and that will be altogether acceptable. "It is the Spirit that quickeneth" This is the beginning of vital religion. "Ye must be born again". Without it your end in religion can be no better than your beginning. Even though you will appear to have much more understanding, and seem to be more

gracious and have more knowledge, more experience, as to the nature of it, being destitute of the Spirit, your end can be no better than the beginning. If you begin in the flesh you will end in the flesh. If you begin in the Spirit you will end in the Spirit. Look at this point. I would never tire of bringing it before you and may you never weary of hearing it - "Ye must be born again". There are some here who are there, some who are not. The condition of those who are dead in trespasses and sins is unspeakably awful. The condition of those who are born again is unspeakably blessed. When the Spirit quickens, He gives light, He gives life, He gives fear; that is to say, He imparts a new nature. It is called being partakers of the divine nature. It is the life of Christ which is imparted. It is a radical change; it is not making the old man better; it is giving, creating, a new man, the hidden man of the heart. It is not lopping off some dead branches and cutting away some vile excrescences; it is the giving of a new heart and a right spirit. It is giving to a sinner what he never sought, never desired. "I am found of them that sought Me not". It is giving knowledge, a knowledge of God. "I will give them a heart to know Me". All right religion, all true conviction, both of sin and of grace, will come, and can only come, from the knowledge of God. The fear of hell may drive a man from immorality into morality; from a wrong place in the world into a church or a chapel, but it can no more make him a Christian, if alone, than a star can be made out of a spark that flies out of the chimney. True religion is of another nature altogether. "And you hath He quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins". A new life was given to them. Take notice of that point, a new life was given to these Ephesian Christians. They were, until then, idolators. Perhaps some of them were in that crowd that shouted till they were all hoarse - "Great is Diana of the Ephesians", but now had come the moment when they were born again. "It is the Spirit that quickeneth". Implicit in the new birth, that is involved in it, are many things, as first, faith, faith in God; a mighty principle this. It will over-ride all your objections, turn out all Ishmaels from your hearts, bring you to believe in God, in His greatness, His justice, His honour, His glory; to believe in the threatenings of the law and its curse. It will over-ride everything that is in you. "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith". He has a great thing in him who has a God given faith. It will trample under foot all your prejudices against Christ, against divine

justice. It will bring you as a needy, naked sinner into the presence of God where you will tremble; into the presence of His holiness, where you will feel yourself too vile to be. It will bring you to deal with Him, and your dealing with Him you will see to be clearly a fruit of His dealing with you. It will make God great; it will make the world small and empty. It will turn it upside down as a man wipeth a dish, turning it upside down. It will make your own soul greater than all concerns that you may have here. Family and business and health and all pleasures will die, so to speak, by the acting of a God wrought faith. It will bring God to you, bring you before Him, make Him real. It is not an imagination; it is not picturing a God; it is not having a God you can grasp in your thoughts. It is knowing the living God about whom you think and in whom you believe without any understanding, for who can understand God. It brings a person in whom it is, and works, to timeless things, and puts out, or puts into their proper places, time things. So Paul said - "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal". Do you know what this faith is? Did it ever carry you to God? Did it ever bring God to you? Did it ever make Him real in your heart, mighty to your own soul? Beyond all comprehension in His greatness, and yet seeing Him stoop to your own condition. See Him a Man, see Him on the cross, see Him bleeding, see Him in heaven, see Him, I say, interceding there, Did you ever find your faith laying hold of the Lamb, the Lamb as it had been slain? If you have this faith, then you will live on God in Christ; you will live for God in Christ; you will live to Him in Christ; you will live for eternity much more at times than for time; you will live nearer unseen things by occasions than you will live near to seen things. "It is the Spirit that quickeneth". This faith enters into Christ's word - "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you". What is this but receiving by faith into a broken heart the Lord Jesus who was crucified? Do you know that? It is a necessity, Christ says, for eternal life, and I would that you should mark it narrowly; it is a necessity. Except you do this you have no life in you. Except you receive into your heart He who gives eternal life, who is eternal life - "I am the life" - assimilate Him by faith, as you

assimilate the food you eat, so that it becomes your life; except you eat Jesus Christ in that way, you are poor, dead creatures, and what will God do to dead creatures. If this precious faith partakes of Christ the soul is satisfied. "The words that I speak unto you they are spirit and they are life" to which faith responds by labouring for that meat which endureth to everlasting life; here she builds. He builds too low who builds beneath the skies, beneath Jesus Christ. He builds well who builds here, so that his hope is alone fixed on the Person, the vicarious death and blessed, glorious resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The spirit of the word enters. "The words that I speak unto you they are spirit". It enters, it is a two-edged sword, cuts away flesh every way, everywhere; wont allow it. You shall see this as you are taught of God, that when the spirit of the word enters into your heart and conscience and understanding you have light into things which differ. You see what is of the flesh and pray to be delivered from it; what is of the Spirit and ask to receive it into your own heart, to receive Jesus Christ even. It was the lack of this that caused that most fearful departure, final departure, from Christ of many of His disciples. "From that time many of His disciples went back and walked no more with Him". They had been attracted to Him, as who would not be in the like circumstances. They had seen His miracles, they had benefited by them; He had fed them. And now, looking to Him because of what they saw Him do, they were disposed to make a king of Him. Then He began to teach them, He began to show them plainly, telling them why it was they went after Him, why they put themselves to so much inconvenience to come after Him and be hungry for a time; why it was that they thought of making Him a king. Now says He to them - "Labour not for the meat that perisheth". You have come after Me for the loaves and fishes; you have come after Me for what you have seen Me do and for the benefit you have had by what I have done, but this is not enough. He teaches them, and the attraction they had felt began to wane and fade away from their minds. What, this man tell us that we must eat His flesh? Who is He? We know His father and His mother. Who is He that He should tell us this? Still the Lord went on with His instruction till it came to the great climax that offended them. Now if we have another spirit in us, that which offended them will draw us, namely that He is to be eaten, namely that He is to be received; that He may be partaken of; that the benefits of His Person and of His death, and of His resurrection

and of His intercession may be had by the poorest and the vilest. The most wicked person who comes to shed a tear over his sins at the throne of grace may find this, that the Lord Jesus is the friend of sinners. And when Christ speaks these instructions on the heart, I say, it becomes an attraction. What offended the world pleased the church. What displeased a Pharisee attracts a mourner. Let this point be before you; how do you regard the words of Christ? Have they ever been made a spirit in you, a spirit to work? The spirit of Christ in the word of Christ is a working operative spirit, operating so as to produce feeling. An unfeeling religion is not worth having. A feeling religion, what is that? A religion that feels after God if haply the soul seeking Him may find Him. A religion that feels after forgiveness, after justification, sanctification, redemption. Less wont satisfy where the Spirit is. "The words that I speak unto you they are spirit and they are life." They have in them a meaning, an intimacy. They have that in them which the flesh cannot regard favourably or receive at all, but they have that in them that, working in the heart, carries it up Godward. It must be a powerful word to lift a lumpish person heavenward, and that is what it is, a powerful word. "The flesh profiteth nothing". Lumpish, inert, hard as the ground when long drought has withered it. The Spirit moving, operating, taking the soul upward, causing glances upward to be within, a feeling after God - "O that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come even to His seat" - this is the spirit of religion, an inward thing; the kingdom of God which, as Christ says in another place, cometh not with observation; not with outward demonstration and show but inward demonstration, setting before the heart, God, so distinctly as that He is real; Christ, setting Him before the heart so distinctly as that He is God and man to that person. And the Spirit, setting Him forth so as He becomes real and desirable and desired. And this great Spirit of God moves, teaches. What do we know about this? Shortly it will be of no use to say that there is a chapel in which to meet here or elsewhere; that there are services in which people are engaging, for we shall be in our graves. What then? Supposing you are, when you die, just as you were as to nature when you were born, well then you will die dead, die in wickedness, in your own unjust condition, guilty. And what will God do to such a person, commit him to heaven? No, if it were possible for him for a moment to be there it would be no heaven to him who dies in sin. A heavenly

nature must be possessed by all who are to come to heaven and enjoy it, but if you have the Spirit then the case is altered, for the Spirit of God coming from heaven into a sinner and quickening him, and making the words of God spirit and life to him, will eventually take him to heaven. "If the Spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you" - dwell in your mortal body - "He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by His Spirit that dwelleth in you". This is very great then for us, very beautiful, very attractive to those in whom the Spirit is.

Now take the words of the blessed gospel, for implicit in the text is the everlasting gospel. Take these words; take for instance an invitation - "Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden" These words show an open way to God. Put by the side of them that wonderful command of the master who had made a supper. "Go", said he, when those who were first bidden declined to come, "Go into the hedges and byeways, bring in the halt and the maimed and the poor and the lame and the blind". Now look at these words; what is there in them if there be no Spirit, but if the Spirit of God is in them to you, if He should kindly speak such a word to any of you in a condition answering to the description, what then? O why, the word will move you wonderfully. It will be like leaven, leavening every thought of your heart, every feeling of your mind. It will be in you a word of encouragement. Does the Lord say, "Come", then I will try to go. Does He say, "Come to Me", then I will try to get to Him. You may say - Hart writes as if Hezekiah should say and you may say with him -

Can prayer reverse the stern decree
And save a wretch condemned like me?
It may; at least I'll try

and the invitation will affect you; it is spirit in you. The letter alone killeth, the Spirit giveth life. The letter of invitation is just put together, the words put together by the compositor and printed on paper; God's very word and yet simply as a letter it has no effect on the mind. Myriads have read these invitations and never had the spirit of them. Take a word of promise - "Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out". "All that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me and him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out". God only

knows how many wicked people have had the wicked thoughts of their hearts manifested by such a word. What? only people come to Christ who were given to Him by His Father. Christ is set for the fall of many, and His word offends many, but when that word is made spirit, comes in the spirit of it, in the light of it, into a man's heart, says he - I will venture. If He wont cast out by any means; if my guilt, my sin, my hardness, my pollution; if the case I am in, empty, void and waste, will not offend Him, will not cause Him to frown upon me, and repel me; if He will make good the promise to me, "I will in no wise cast out"; I will venture. I will ask Him to do it. The spirit of the word comes into his heart; it discriminates between the living and the dead, and although the man may feel very dead often, and much more death than life may be in him, still he comes; he ventures.

Take the word "justification". This is a sound when you hear it, a word when you read it. Is that all it has ever been to you? How poor it is then. But should the Holy Ghost take of it and speak it to an unjust soul, to one who says, I have nothing but guilt and sin in my nature, but Jesus Christ is the righteousness of a sinner who is brought to Him, why you cannot, if you have not felt it at all, enter into the attraction of it, the beauty, the blessedness of it. O there is no trouble, no fear, no timidity, no shyness, no unbelief that can keep a person away from God who sees in the spirit the beautiful righteousness of Jesus Christ. O the soul says, I would fain be dressed in beauty not my own. I am willing to be plunged into debt deeper than all others if I may but have this justification. The word profits him; he goes to God, and the day comes when he says, "Surely in the Lord have I righteousness". This is the righteousness, this is the spotless robe, this is the justification of a sinner; this is his title to bliss.

Take the word "sanctification". What a word it is; what a word it becomes in the spirit to a person who says I am but sin; I am drenched in it, drowned in it, full of it. It is a subtle gas; I cannot keep it out. I thought I corked up that place and filled up the other and there was no room for it here and there, but I find it is still with me; I cannot keep it out. Do you love it? You will say sometimes that it is the worst part of me, that I not only have sin, but I love it. What then? Read of sanctification, let the Spirit

drop the word sanctification into your heart, and you will say with a kind of leap, O this is what I want, and you will seek it. The word is spirit and life to you. It animates your desire, it strengthens your longings, it opens your mouth in astonishment, it carries you in its own strength to the throne of God's heavenly grace. And love of holiness is, as it were, born of that, and now you say "I would be holy". We little know the value the Lord God attaches to a "would do" and "would be", in His people. Let me make out to you what I mean by referring to David. He would build a house for God and God said, no, you shall not. Now said He to David, I have approved your wish to do it, it was well that it was in thine heart. You shall not accomplish your design, but it was well that you designed it. So when there is a willing mind; when one says, as from the depth of his soul, with a loathing in it of sin inexpressible - though from sin he thinks he is in a position that is inescapable - "I would be holy", says the Lord, it was well that it was in thine heart. It is well that you have got a desire. Whence came it? From My Spirit, from that new nature I have given to you.

Take the word of promise - "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee". One feels alone sometimes, no God present, no enjoyment of His presence. There is a presence never intermitted, never withdrawn. There is a presence often intermitted and it is this latter presence I speak of as being not experienced. Now says the Lord "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee". You judge that by your feelings sometimes, judge it by your rather frequent and painful experience, and you say, I have no interest in that word; at least I fear not. Judge it by the Spirit when He speaks it to you, when you find some sweet communication made to your heart, some sweet sense of the favour of God compassing you about as with a shield, some view of the convoy of His love that has never been withdrawn though not always perceived, and you say, now I think I see a little more into it and have a little more hope that I have that very presence promised, that very presence that is not to be withdrawn.

"The words that I speak unto you they are spirit". They mean something more than you, my ordinary, external disciples understand. But now the eleven, left as it were by all that multitude, had a very penetrating question put to them. "Will ye also go away?" O, but

Christ was their life, Christ was their life, and so says Peter - "To whom shall we go". If we leave Thee, if we follow these many disciples who have made the last step toward Thee and taken the last step away from Thee, and yet not the last, where shall we go. "Thou hast the words of eternal life" Well now what is your attitude to this Lord and to His words, and what is your experience of Him and of His words? To His people He will make Himself the centre and the circumference of their religion, the life of their souls, the beauty that they hope to stand in before God, the title they are to have for eternal bliss, the bread they are to have for their nourishment here, the water that is to refresh them in the wilderness. He is all this, all this. If I only could preach Him as I want to do and ought to do, I should say much more about Him than I have ever said or can say, as I am now. O what a Christ He is. I wonder how many of us this morning can really join with the church in her endeavour to praise and set Him out as He ought to be. She said - This is my friend, this is my beloved. He is altogether lovely, the chiefest among ten thousand. And yet to many, to the great majority of people, He is a name, only a name, a great man, but a man. We believe that God has made to some of us the Manhood of Christ a precious and vital reality. Without Him there could be no redemption and therefore no way to God, but He was God manifest in the flesh, Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life. What is Christ to us? The chiefest among ten thousand, fairer than the children of men. Has He any grace poured into His lips to our view, so as to make it desirable to us to hear Him speak? "The words that I speak unto you they are spirit and they are life".

Now there is just one word more that a child of God will one day hear, and what life it will be; what a spirit it will be when, before the great white throne the assembled world shall stand; many here, some there, here a great multitude that no man can number, and every child of God there shall hear Him say this - "Come ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from before the foundation of the world". I say, what a word that will be, an entrance into bliss, a gathering to the throne where God is and the Lamb is and the Spirit is, that is the Trinity. A gathering with that mighty multitude to living fountains of waters, and worship in the unbuilt temple; a walking in that sun that never sets, the light that never fades. "The words that I speak unto you", My disciples, "they

are spirit and they are life", and this shall be the end, that is to say the beginning of that blessed life that shall know no death because it has in it no corruption.

AMEN.