

The Spirit Descending Like a Dove

“And praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon Him.”

– Luke 3:21-22

Summary:

The Holy Spirit’s descent upon Jesus at his baptism may be viewed as an answer to prayer, a miraculous authentication of his divine mission, and a meaningful emblem. Christ’s example teaches believers to pray after receiving an ordinance and before beginning any undertaking. The visible sign and the Father’s voice publicly confirmed Jesus as the Son of God. The dove also portrayed the peaceful grace of the Gospel, the gentleness and compassion of Christ, and the character that should mark his disciples. The presence of the Spirit is therefore best tested not by a particular conversion experience, strong impressions, or remarkable gifts, but by a growing likeness to Christ and the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control.

Outline:

- 1. The descent answered prayer**
 - Jesus prayed before entering public ministry, teaching us to seek God before every undertaking.
- 2. The miracle confirmed Christ’s mission**
 - The visible sign and the Father’s voice decisively identified Jesus as the Son of God.
- 3. The dove pictured the Gospel of peace**
 - Christ announces grace, reconciliation, and deliverance rather than the terrors of condemnation.
- 4. The dove reflected Christ’s character**
 - Love, tenderness, gentleness, patience, mercy, and readiness to forgive filled his life.
- 5. The dove describes Christ’s disciples**
 - The Spirit is known by Christlike dispositions and fruit, not merely by experiences, impressions, or gifts.

Text

We may consider the Holy Spirit's descent upon Jesus in three ways: as an answer to prayer, as a miraculous testimony, and as a significant emblem.

Jesus had just been baptized and was about to begin his public ministry. We know he truly prayed, though not whether aloud or silently. If prayer was necessary for him, can it be needless for us? He also set an example, teaching us to pray after participating in an ordinance and before undertaking any endeavor. His prayers were not in vain: the Father always heard him because he prayed according to God's will.

How promptly the answer came! It reached him while he prayed: "And praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him." The same occurred at the Transfiguration: "As he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening."

The prayer of faith is always heard at once. If the answer is delayed, it is not because God is reluctant to bless us; as a God of judgment, he waits to be gracious. Scripture, experience, and prayer's blessings assure us that he is near: "Before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear."

The descent must also be viewed as a miracle confirming Christ's divine mission. The accompanying voice declared, "Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased." John had been told to expect this sign. Though related to Jesus, he had not seen him before, ruling out any suspicion of collusion. God had told John, "Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost." John therefore testified, "I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God."

Nothing could have been clearer or more decisive. The foretold sign's brightness, form, and descent were visible; it remained upon Jesus for some time, all before a multitude. How unlike pagan prodigies and false wonders are the Gospel miracles! The miracle would have remained so regardless of the Spirit's visible form, but the symbol would differ. The Spirit descended "in a bodily shape like a dove" as an emblem.

First, the dove represented the dispensation Christ came to announce. The law, called a fiery law, works wrath against every transgressor. Its giving brought a shaking, burning mountain; blackness, darkness, tempest, trumpet blasts, and a terrifying voice that the people could not endure. Moses himself said, "I exceedingly fear and quake."

But grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. When he began preaching the kingdom of heaven, the heavens opened—not with thunder or lightning, but as the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove. The dove's return to Noah's ark with an olive leaf, signaling the flood's end, has long symbolized peace. Christ announced deliverance from coming wrath and preached peace to those far away and near. He heralded a new spring and nobler renewal, calling, "Come; for all things are now ready."

Second, the dove represented Christ's character. He embodied its love, tenderness, gentleness, and mildness, as the prophets foretold. His miracles and life show him doing good—kind to friends, merciful to the distressed, gracious to the guilty, forgiving, and patient under provocation. He was compassion embodied.

Third, the dove represented Christ's disciples, who must resemble him. Christ has pre-eminence in everything, but anyone without his Spirit does not belong to him; the person joined to the Lord is one spirit with him. Therefore, measure your religion by resemblance to this image—not by opinions, but principles; not impressions, but dispositions; not gifts, but grace.

Some fear they are strangers to the Spirit because they did not receive him through intense terror and anguish. This may happen, as with the jailer, but not always; Cornelius and Lydia came to faith differently. Any distress or conviction is worthless unless it brings us to Christ. If it has, let us be thankful and rejoice, whatever the circumstances. Judge not by the manner of the Spirit's operation, but by its influence and effects—the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance."

This sermon is taken from William Jay's devotional, *Morning and Evening Exercises* (January 20, Morning), first published in 1854.