

“DISCOVERING THE SPIRIT-EMPOWERED LIFE”

Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:1-21 ¹

It hadn't even been two months, and yet so much had happened that their lives felt completely upended and inside out. They'd come to Jerusalem for Passover, expecting Jesus to somehow take over the government, eject the Roman army of occupation, and install the twelve of them as the cabinet of a renewed Davidic Kingdom . . . but instead Jesus had been arrested and cruelly executed as a common criminal.

They had watched Jesus die . . . and their hopes with Him . . . but then three days later He rose from death and powerfully demonstrated to them and to many others that He was actually alive. After His resurrection, Jesus had spent about six weeks with them, teaching them about their role in the new realities of the Kingdom of God . . . but *then* He unexpectedly ascended into heaven in a cloud of glory after telling them to wait in Jerusalem until He sent the Holy Spirit to them.²

It had now been nearly two weeks since Jesus ascended, and the disciples and the other believers had gathered to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, when *suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them* (Acts 2:2-4).

It should have been no surprise, I guess. Jesus had clearly told them that “*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth!*” (Acts 1:8). Yes, Jesus had told them, but they hadn't understood what He meant any more than you and I would have done. They were caught up in their own ideas of greatness and significance, which put them completely off the track of what God intended to do . . . and we still do the same thing today.

It's perhaps unfortunate that we speak of the events at Pentecost as “the coming of the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit didn't come into existence on Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost was the “birth of the Spirit” in the same sense that the manger was the “birth of the Son.” Both Son and Spirit have existed from everlasting to everlasting; yet these “births” were indeed the beginnings of new chapters in God's eternal plan.

Although the Spirit didn't come into existence at Pentecost, something very special *did happen* then. **What happened on Pentecost morning was that the Spirit was given to every believer**, rather than being given only to particular persons at particular times, as had always been the case before. From that moment forward the Holy Spirit became the dominant reality in the life of the Church; and today, God's Spirit continues to take up residence in the heart and life of every person who places her or his faith in Jesus.

If we've been born again, the Bible tells us that God's Spirit lives within us (1 John 2:27, 4:4), that the Spirit helps us and prays for us (Romans 8:26). The Spirit reminds us

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on May 27, 2012.

² Clouds have an interesting function in the Bible. At Jesus' Ascension, a cloud enveloped Him and He disappeared into it, ending the period of His Incarnation. Previously, a cloud of glory had enveloped Jesus at His Transfiguration on the mountain (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36), and we're told that when Jesus returns to usher in the Day of the Lord, He will come “*on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory*” (Matthew 24:30).² The cloud in each case is probably to be understood as the cloud of God's glory (*kabod*), the cloud which, resting above the Tent of Meeting in the days of Moses (Exodus 40:34) or filling the Temple as Solomon dedicated it (1 Kings 8:11), the visible sign to Israel that the holy and sovereign Presence of the Lord was within.

of what Jesus taught, and the Spirit shows us how to follow Him (John 14:26). Because the Spirit is personal, as the Father and the Son are personal, the Spirit longs for us to be faithful (James 4:5), can experience sorrow (Eph. 4:30), and can be grieved, stifled, ignored, and quenched (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

To give anything like a full discussion the work of God's Spirit in our lives would require far more time than we have this morning. In the next few minutes I'm going to focus on just three dimensions of the Spirit's work in our lives: guidance, gifts, and power.

First, **guidance**. The Bible tells us that the Spirit reveals God's own thoughts to us, guiding our daily lives and choices (1 Corinthians 2:10-15). Sometimes the Spirit guides us by forming and shaping our minds so that we think more and more as God thinks (Philippians 2:5). Sometimes we're guided in more direct ways.

Philip traveled to see the Ethiopian eunuch because the Spirit "told him" to do this (Acts 8:29). Peter went to Cornelius' house because the Spirit "told him to go" (Acts 11:12). Paul was "kept by the Spirit" from preaching in Asia, being sent to Macedonia instead (Acts 19:6-10), and he was "compelled by the Spirit" to go to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22).

There have been occasions in my life when God has spoken to me so clearly and so powerfully that I was stunned; but most of the time, I find that God guides me in more subtle ways, by what I call "spiritual promptings." Spiritual promptings sometimes come as the sense that I should do a particular thing, or should not do it. Sometimes they come as thoughts that I should call or visit someone.

So how do we know that such a prompting is from God? Well, how do you recognize your Mother's voice? We recognize the prompting of the Spirit of Jesus because we've lived with Him and loved Him so long that we know Him. And even when we may be unsure of the voice, we recognize the prompting to be the sort of thing that fits His character. I've learned more and more to "just do it." Countless believers across the centuries have testified that life in the Spirit is a joy-filled adventure (Luke 10:21, Acts 13:52), and it is indeed quite a ride!

A second work that the Spirit does in our lives is to empower us with **spiritual gifts** for the building up of the Body of Christ. Paul put it this way: "*There are different kinds of gifts, but the same **Spirit** distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same **Lord**. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same **God** at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good*" (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

There are three key indicators that can help you recognize your spiritual gift or gifts. The first signal that you're using a spiritual gift is that you will experience significant joy as you use it. As Olympic runner Eric Liddell famously said a century ago, "God made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure."³

A second principal sign that a spiritual gift is at work is that the effect produced by our efforts greatly exceeds the effort we put in. Part of the joy of using our gifts to build up the church is watching how God multiplies the effect of what we do far beyond anything we might have reasonably expected—rather like what happened to the boy's small lunch when Jesus used it to feed well over 5,000 people (John 6:1-15).

Third, if we're exercising our spiritual gifts according to God's purpose, this exercise has yet another noteworthy effect. Used as God intends, our spiritual gifts not only bring us joy;

³ *Chariots of Fire*, written by Collin Welland and directed by Hugh Hudson (20th Century Fox, 1981).

they not only produce effects that are frequently amazing; but they also change our character along the way, causing us to think and act more and more like Jesus Himself. As Paul wrote: “*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Finally, after **guidance** and **spiritual gifts**, if our lives are indeed controlled by God’s Spirit, we’ll have a **spiritual power** that others will sense and to which they will be attracted—as the crowd in Jerusalem was attracted to the wind and the fire on Pentecost morning. You may remember that just moments before He returned to heaven, Jesus told His disciples, “Don’t just do something. Stand there.” Well, okay, that’s not an exact quote.

What Jesus really said was, “*Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 1:4-5). When that happens, Jesus continued, “***you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth***” (Acts 1:8).

So what does this spiritual power look like? Well, the Spirit gives us power to love our enemies and to “forgive those who trespass against us” (Matthew 5:44, 6:12). We can’t do those things on our own.

The Spirit gives us power in prayer (Ephesians 6:18), power to understand Truth (Ephesians 3:18), power for self-discipline (2 Timothy 1:7), power to heal (1 Corinthians 12:9), power to do what pleases God (Philippians 2:13), and power over all the forces of Darkness (Luke 9:1, 10:19).

But unfortunately, many of us are strangers to such power. In his book, *Forgotten God*, Francis Chan pointed out that “Given our talent set, experience, and education, many of us are fairly capable of living rather successfully (according to the world’s standards) without any strength from the Holy Spirit.”⁴ “You don’t need the Holy Spirit if you are merely seeking to live a semi-moral life and attend church regularly. You can find people of all sorts in many religions doing that quite nicely without Him. You only need the Holy Spirit’s guidance and help if you truly want to follow the Way of Jesus Christ.”⁵

On the subject of spiritual power, Chan challenged us to “Look over [the list of the fruit of the Spirit] and ask yourself if you possess [those traits] to a supernatural degree. Do you exhibit more kindness and faithfulness than the Mormons you know? Do you have more self-control than your Muslim friends? More peace than Buddhists? More joy than atheists? If *GOD* truly lives in you, shouldn’t you expect to be *different* from everyone else?”⁶

“The world is not moved by love or actions that are of human creation,” he continued. “But when believers live in the power of the Spirit, the evidence in their lives is *supernatural*. The church cannot help but be different, and the world cannot help but notice.”⁷

Finally, Chan concluded, “I don’t believe God wants me (or any of His children) to live in a way that makes sense from the world’s perspective, a way I know I can ‘manage.’ . . . I don’t want my life to be explainable without the Holy Spirit. I want people to look at my life and know that I couldn’t be doing this by my own power.”⁸

⁴ Francis Chan, *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), p. 31.

⁵ Chan, p. 122.

⁶ Chan, p. 146.

⁷ Chan, p. 17.

⁸ Chan, pp. 142-143.

“Well, if that’s so,” you may be thinking, “where is the *guidance*, where are the *gifts*, and where is the *power in my life*?” Those are very good questions. The key that unlocks spiritual guidance, spiritual gifts, and spiritual power in our lives is an experience the New Testament calls “being filled with” the Spirit.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit has to do with placing our lives at the Spirit’s disposal and under the Spirit’s control. To be *filled* with the Holy Spirit is to live in constant dependence on Him and in complete surrender to Him. While we receive the full gift of the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives at the moment we’re born again, it takes most of us quite some time to learn how to live in the fullness of the Spirit’s power. Although the gift of the Spirit is given once for all time, being filled with the Spirit is the result of an act of the will that has to be repeated many times every day. It’s a lot like breathing.

Being filled with the Spirit is a moment-by-moment experience, repeated, renewed, and deepened throughout our lives, because the Spirit’s control of our lives is no more automatic because we’ve been born again than salvation is automatic because we’ve been born the first time. God’s Spirit fills and controls our lives by invitation only, and this filling is the secret to spiritual power.

When Paul wrote, “*Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit*” (Ephesians 5:18), his point was that the person who is filled with the Spirit will be controlled by the Spirit even as some persons are filled with and controlled by alcohol or other drugs. And Paul makes it very clear that this filling is an experience needed by every Christian, not some special blessing for the spiritually elite. **Being filled with and controlled by God’s Spirit is absolutely essential for a normal Christian life.** Anything less is *sub-normal*.⁹

As we consider these things on this Pentecost Sunday morning, you and I need to do our best to be honest about the level at which our lives actually *are* prayer-filled, Bible-centered, virtuous, compassionate, integrated, and spiritually powerful. We need to identify those places where we fall short of virtue and holiness. We need to identify ways in which we’re being disobedient to what we know God intends for us to do, because **it is disobedience, more than anything else, that puts out the Spirit’s fire.**

What are you allowing to continue in your life that falls short of virtue and holiness? What are you failing to do that God’s Word requires? When the Holy Spirit is given freedom to act, He will manifest His presence in a power that will “set fire” to others and that often spreads like forest fire.

C.S. Lewis noted that God shows much more of Himself to some people than to others, not because God has favorites, but because it is impossible for God to be known by a person whose mind and heart are in the wrong condition. Think about sunlight. Though sunlight has no favorites, it cannot be reflected in a dusty mirror as clearly as in a clean one, and it cannot be reflected at all in a mirror that has been painted black. Son Light is like that, too.

As we sit here this morning, maybe you and I need to be asking ourselves whether we’ve gotten too comfortable in our faith. The greatest problem in our spiritual lives frequently is that we live domesticated lives in the service of a domesticated God we’ve created in our own image. We become more interested in our own comfort and preferences than we are in following and serving a holy, powerful and dangerous God who is rebuilding creation and creating an eternal Kingdom right here, and right under Satan’s nose.

⁹ See Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Bombay, India: Gospel Literature Service, 1957).

Paul told us that “***the Kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power***” (1 Corinthians 4:20). When *Newsweek* asked Garrison Keillor several years ago to list the five most important books he’d ever read, some were probably surprised that Keillor put the book of Acts at the top of his list with the statement, “The flames lit on their little heads and bravely and dangerously went they onward.”¹⁰

My prayer is that in just such a way, God will pour out the Spirit’s power upon us in this place, that “the flames of God’s Spirit may light on our little heads, such that bravely and dangerously we go onward.” But if this is to happen, the Spirit’s fire has to fill and control you; and the Spirit’s fire has to fill and control me.

God’s power will be poured out in this place if we deeply desire it, if we open ourselves to it, and if we steadfastly remove those things that prevent its coming. Are we willing to risk it?

¹⁰ Garrison Keillor, “My Five Most Important Books,” *Newsweek*, December 24, 2007, 17.