

“POWER UP”

Responsive Reading “Power from On High” 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 had risen from death and powerfully demonstrated to them and to many others that He was actually alive once more. 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 they received “power from on high.”

It had now been nearly two weeks since Jesus ascended, and the disciples and the other believers had gathered to celebrate the annual 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).

In order to get some sense of what this must have been like, try to imagine that Columbia is hosting an international festival such that the city is filled with persons from all over the world. Now try to imagine that we've gathered for worship in this place on the Sunday of the festival while the city is filled with strangers whose native tongues are anything but English.

Suddenly, out of a clear blue sky, we become aware of the sound of violent wind, louder and more frightening than a tornado. As we look at each other in shock and fear, trying to decide whether to evacuate or to hunker down, things go from bad to worse. Now the very air itself seems to suddenly be filled with fire, a conflagration that not only fills the room, but that just as suddenly separates into smaller flames that come to rest on every one of us.

And while we're trying to deal with the shock of all this, things become stranger still. Some of us begin speaking in German, though we don't know how to speak German. Some of us begin speaking in Russian, though we don't know how to speak Russian. Many of us begin speaking in Spanish, though we don't know how to speak Spanish. Some of us begin speaking Lithuanian; some Turkish; some Arabic; some Italian; some Chinese. The room is now filled, not only with wind and fire, but with a cacophony of voices speaking most of the primary languages of the world.

The sound of the wind has been heard all over town, and a huge crowd is now gathering in our parking lot as folks from all over the world who are here for the festival come to see what destruction the wind has wrought. But instead of destruction, what they find is all of us speaking their own native languages. And to their bewilderment, they hear us declaring the wonders of God's love in their own tongues. *Amazed and perplexed, they ask one another, “What does this mean?”* (Acts 2:5-12).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on May 20, 2018. Pentecost Sunday.

It should have been no surprise, I guess. Jesus had clearly told them that “*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end 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. They were caught up in their own ideas about becoming great and powerful, which put them completely off the track of what God intended to do . . . and we still do the same thing today.

It’s unfortunate that we sometimes speak of the events at Pentecost as “the coming of the Holy Spirit,” because the Holy Spirit certainly didn’t come into existence on Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost was the “birth of the Spirit” in the same way that the manger of Bethlehem 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 in perpetuity**, rather than being given only temporarily to particular persons at particular times, as had always been the case before. From that moment forward the Holy Spirit became—and remains—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 their faith in Jesus.

My friends, if we’ve been born again, the Bible tells us that God’s Spirit lives within us (1 John 2:27, 4:4), and that the Spirit helps us and prays for us (Romans 8:26). The Spirit reminds us 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. I’ll attach a handout of that sort with the online version of this sermon. But for 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 meet 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 and talked with Him for 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 over the years that when the Voice speaks, "just do it," and countless believers across the centuries have testified that life in the Spirit is a joy-filled adventure, and it is indeed quite a ride! (Luke 10:21, Acts 13:52).

A second work that the Spirit does in our lives is to empower us with **spiritual gifts** that build up the Church. 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."² The first question, then, is what ministry activities bring you the most satisfaction, fulfillment, and joy?

A second 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). So a second question is, in what ministry activities are you most effective? Are there particular needs that seems to always get your attention? This might be a sign of God's Spirit at work through you.

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; 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). So, ask yourself, in what ministry areas do others most often see God at work through your life? In what activities are you most aware of exhibiting these character qualities?

The answers to these questions are likely to get you "in the ball park" for discovering your spiritual gifts, and more resources will be available online. 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, 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 end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

So what does this spiritual power look like in our lives? 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.

² *Chariots of Fire*, written by Collin Welland and directed by Hugh Hudson (20th Century Fox, 1981).

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).

With respect to spiritual power, Francis Chan challenges 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?”³

“The world is not moved by actions that are of human creation,” Chan 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.”⁴

Finally, he 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.”⁵

“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 every day 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 spiritual 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 else is less than normal.⁶

³ Francis Chan, *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), p. 146.

⁴ Chan, p. 17.

⁵ Chan, pp. 142-143.

⁶ See Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Bombay, India: Gospel Literature Service, 1957).

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, congruent, and spiritually powerful. We need to identify those places where we fall short of virtue and holiness.

And we especially need to identify ways in which we may be 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.** Are there things that you are allowing to continue in your life that fall short of virtue and holiness? Are there things you are failing to do that God's Word requires?

One of the many ways in which we allow God's power to flow through our lives is to be disciplined in our stewardship of the gifts and abilities God has placed in our lives. You have a handout in your worship order that explains many things about spiritual gifts, and other resources will be available online.

C.S. Lewis noted that God releases much more of Heaven's Power through some people than through 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. Sun Light is like that, too.

God has given gifts to every one of us for building up the church, and every one of us should be doing something every week that uses our gifts to fulfill this calling. If every one of us does *something*, none of us will have to do a bunch of things, and that part of the Body of Christ known as the Columbia Baptist Fellowship will be stronger, healthier, and more powerful.

Paul told us that "***the Kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power***" (1 Corinthians 4:20). 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. When the Holy Spirit is given freedom to act, He will manifest His presence in a power that often spreads like forest fire.

Let the fire fall!

Power from On High

Leader: *“If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; **I will come to you** (John 14:15-18).*

People: ***I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high*** (Luke 24:49).

Leader: *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 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. [And] all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4).*

People: ***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).

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.

People: **Thanks be to God!**