

3. Be Filled with the Holy Spirit

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My wife and I have two children, who are now grown up. Bringing new life into the world is a profound experience and not for the faint at heart. It takes a lifetime of commitment. What if I had said to my wife after bringing our firstborn to birth, "Let's leave our daughter to help herself—she can manage on her own now." No, that would be foolishness. God doesn't do that either. He has given His Holy Spirit to help all Christians grow and walk hand in hand with Him. Paul the apostle wrote, **"Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit"** (Ephesians 5:18). But what does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit? How does one fulfill that command of God? How can being filled with the Spirit change our lives? It is my belief that the experience of being filled with the Spirit is relevant for every believer in Christ today. It is not meant to be a reality for a handful of super-saints or first-century Christians only. Is this something we all need to experience? Let me illustrate with the following story:

A poor man has wanted to go on a cruise all his life. As a young person, he saw an advertisement for a luxury cruise, and since then, he has dreamed of spending a week on a large ocean liner enjoying the fresh sea air and relaxing in a luxurious environment. He has saved money for years, carefully counting his pennies, often sacrificing personal needs so he can stretch his resources a little further.

Finally, he had enough to purchase a cruise ticket. He went to a travel agent, looked over the cruise brochures, picked out one that was especially attractive, and bought a ticket with the money he had saved so long. He could hardly believe he was about to realize his childhood dream. Knowing he could not afford the elegant food pictured in the brochure, the man planned to bring his own provisions for the week. Accustomed to moderation after years of frugal living and spending his entire savings on the cruise ticket, the man decided to bring a week's supply of bread and peanut butter. That was all he could afford.

The first few days of the cruise were thrilling. The man ate peanut butter sandwiches alone in his room each morning and spent the rest of his time relaxing in the sunlight and fresh air, delighted to be aboard the ship. However, by midweek, he noticed that he was the only person on board not eating luxurious meals. Every time he sat on the deck or rested in the lounge, or stepped outside his cabin, a porter would walk by with a massive meal for someone who had ordered room service.

By the fifth day of the cruise, the man could take it no longer. The peanut butter sandwiches seemed stale and tasteless, and he was desperately hungry. Finally, he stopped a porter and exclaimed, "Tell me how I might get one of those meals! I'm dying for some decent food, and I'll do anything you say to earn it!" "Why, sir, don't you have a ticket for this cruise?" the porter asked. "Certainly," said the man. "But I spent everything I had on that ticket. I have nothing left with which to buy food." "But sir," said the porter, "didn't you realize that meals are included in your passage? You may eat as much as you like!"

As ridiculous as it may seem, we believers in Jesus Christ generally do precisely the same thing as the man in the parable. We live as if we are in spiritual poverty when we already possess infinite resources through our union with Christ.

The Holy Spirit Brings a Radical Change in Character

In Acts chapter 9, we see one of the most remarkable conversions—Saul, the radical zealot for Judaism, became a believer in Christ. When Saul approved of the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, he witnessed Stephen praying and asking God to forgive his persecutors (Acts 8:1). He shrugged off the conviction he started having (Acts 26:14) and began to destroy the church, going house to house, dragging men and women off to prison (Acts 8:3). At the beginning of chapter 9, we find him still “breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples” (Acts 9:1), but within the space of a few days, Saul was preaching in synagogues that “Jesus is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20), causing total astonishment to non-believers and believers alike. People asked one another, “Isn’t he the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on his name?” [of Jesus] (Acts 9:21). The Lord Jesus appeared to Saul on the road outside the city of Damascus, saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”⁵ “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do” (Acts 9:4-6). He was blind for three days and did not eat or drink anything (v. 9). After three days, the Lord spoke to a disciple named Ananias and told him to go and pray for Saul “for he is praying” (v. 11). Here's the passage describing what happened to Saul:

¹⁷Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized,¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength (Acts 9:17-19).

Describe what caused a remarkable change in Saul's character. What changes are indicated?

What happened in those few days to change Saul so wholly? First, he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. Meeting the Lord Jesus will change your life. Secondly, he had “been filled with the Spirit” (Acts 9:17). He had an experience with God that turned everything around for him. Thirdly, at the moment of Ananias' prayer for Saul, “something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again” (v. 18). It sometimes happens that people who were not Christians, or who were even strongly anti-Christian, have a complete turnaround in their lives when they come to Christ and are filled with the Spirit. They can become powerful advocates of the Christian faith. Where sin abounds, grace so much more abounds (Romans 5:20). At this point, we need to back up in the Book of Acts and look at what happened fifty days after the crucifixion of Christ, the day God poured out the Holy Spirit:

The Day of Pentecost

¹When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they

were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ⁵Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? ⁸Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹(both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” ¹²Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine” (Acts 2:1-13).

Luke uses the language of a heavy tropical rainstorm to describe the power of the Spirit coming and flooding the apostles' beings. There were physical manifestations of hearing a blowing wind (v. 2); it was not a real gale, but it resembled one. It was the mighty invisible power of the *Ruach* of God; this is the same Hebrew word used in the Old Testament for wind, breath, and spirit. Sometimes, when people are filled, they shake like a leaf in the wind. Others find themselves breathing deeply as if almost physically breathing in the Spirit.

They also saw something that resembled fire, described as tongues of fire that came down and settled on the heads of the disciples of Christ (Acts 2:3). Physical heat sometimes accompanies the filling of the Spirit, as people experience heat in their hands or some other part of their bodies. One person described a feeling of glowing all over. Another said she experienced "liquid heat." Another person described the experience as "burning in my arms when I was not hot." Fire perhaps symbolizes the power, passion, and purity the Spirit of God brings to our lives.

For others, the experience of the Spirit may be an overwhelming experience of the love of God. The apostle Paul prayed for the believers in Christ at the church in Ephesus that they might have “power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:18). The love of Christ is wide enough to reach every person in the world. It reaches across every continent to people of every race, color, tribe, and background. It is long enough to last throughout a lifetime and into eternity, and it is deep enough to reach us however far we have fallen. It is high enough to lift us into heavenly places. We see this love supremely in the cross of Christ. We know Christ’s love for us because He was willing to die for us. Paul prayed that we would grasp the extent of God’s love.

Speaking of the Spirit of God, Charles Spurgeon says, “He has embraced us,” and He pours His love upon us, and He "hugs" us. Martyn Lloyd-Jones quotes these examples, among many others, in his book on Romans and comments on the experience of the Holy Spirit:

Let us realize then the profound character of the experience. This is not light and superficial and ordinary; it is not something of which you can say, "Don't worry about your feelings." Worry about your feelings? You will have such a depth of feeling that, for a moment, you

may well imagine that you have never "felt" anything in your life before. It is the profoundest experience that a man can ever know.¹

Experiencing the Power of the Holy Spirit

Another incident early in the book of Acts was the first occasion when Gentiles (Non-Jews) were filled with the Spirit. God did something extraordinary, starting with a vision given to a Roman centurion called Cornelius. God also spoke to Peter through a vision and told him to go and speak to the Gentiles at the house of Cornelius. When he arrived at the house of Cornelius and began to preach, halfway through Peter's talk, something remarkable happened:

The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers [that is, the Jews] who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God (Acts 10:44-46).

God interrupted the meeting in Cornelius's house. Peter had to stop talking because it was evident that something was happening in the home (v. 44). The filling of the Holy Spirit rarely happens imperceptibly, although the experience is different for everyone.

Why do you think the Jewish believers were astonished that the Holy Spirit was given to the Gentiles? How did this change their thinking?

The believers were released to voice their praise to God.

When these Gentiles were filled with the Spirit, they started "praising God" (Acts 10:46). Spontaneous praise is the language of people who are excited and thrilled about their experience of God. It should involve our whole personality, including our emotions. I am asked, "Is it right to express emotions in church? Isn't there a danger of emotionalism? The danger for most of us in our relationship with God is not emotionalism but a lack of emotion—a lack of feeling.

Someone could argue that emotions are all right in private, but what about the public demonstration of emotion? After a conference at Brighton, England, attended by the Archbishop of Canterbury, *The London Times* carried correspondence about the place of emotions in church. Under the title "Carey's Charisms," one man wrote:

Why is it that if a cinema comedy produces laughter, the film is regarded as successful; if a theatre tragedy brings tears to the audience, the production is regarded as touching; if a football match thrills the spectators, the game is reviewed as exciting; but if the glory of God moves the congregation in worship, the audience are accused of emotionalism?

They received a new Language.

¹ <http://spirit-of-god.blogspot.com/2007/09/quotes-of-dr-lloyd-jones-they-didnt.html>

The word for "tongues" is the same as "languages," meaning the ability to speak in a language you have never learned. It may be an angelic language (1 Corinthians 13:1), which presumably is not recognizable, or it may be a recognizable human language as it was on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). In one meeting, a young woman named Penny was praying with another woman. She ran out of words in English and started praying in tongues. Her friend smiled and then opened her eyes and started laughing. She said, "You have just spoken to me in Russian." The friend, although English, spoke fluent Russian and had a great love for the language. Penny asked, "What have I been saying?" The friend told Penny that she was saying, "My dear child," over and over again.

What is Speaking in Tongues?

Speaking in tongues is a form of prayer (one of many different forms of prayer found in the New Testament), according to Paul:

For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to *God*. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit (1 Corinthians 14:2-3).

Tongues are a form of prayer that builds up the individual Christian— "**He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself**" (v. 4). The gifts that edify the church are even more important, but this does not make tongues unimportant. The benefit of tongues is that they are a form of prayer that transcends the limitations of human language. This seems to be what Paul means when he says:

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful (1 Corinthians 14:14).

How Does Speaking in Tongues Help the Believer in Christ?

Praise and worship. When we are brought close to God, we long to express to Him our worship and praise of God, particularly so when we are filled with the Spirit. The gift of tongues enables us to do this without the limitation of human language.

Prayer under pressure. Speaking in tongues can be a great help when praying under pressure. There are times in our lives when it is hard to know exactly how to pray. It can be because many stresses, anxieties, or griefs burden us. Not long ago, somebody prayed for a man aged twenty-six after his wife had died of cancer after only one year of married life. He asked for and instantly received the gift of tongues; all the things he had pushed down in his life seemed to pour out. Afterward, he said that it was a great relief to unburden himself from all those things.

Prayer for others. It is not selfish to want to pray in tongues. Although, "**he who speaks in a tongue edifies himself**" (1 Corinthians 14:4). Jackie Pullinger, a missionary lady who works in a spiritually dark place in Hong Kong, described the transformation in her ministry when she began to use the gift of speaking in tongues:

By the clock, I prayed 15 minutes a day in the language of the Spirit and still felt nothing as I asked the Spirit to help me intercede for those he wanted to reach. After about six weeks of this, I began to lead people to Jesus without trying. Gangsters fell to their knees

sobbing in the streets; women were healed, and heroin addicts were miraculously set free. And I knew it all had nothing to do with me.

It was also the gateway for her to receive other gifts of the Spirit:

With my friends, I began to learn about the other gifts of the Spirit, and we experienced a remarkable few years of ministry. Scores of gangsters and well-to-do people, students, and churchmen were converted, and all received a new language to pray in private and other gifts to use when meeting together. We opened several homes to house heroin addicts, and all were delivered from drugs painlessly because of the power of the Holy Spirit.

How do we receive the gift of tongues?

Not every Christian speaks in tongues (1 Corinthians 12:30). Yet Paul wrote: **“I would like every one of you to speak in tongues” (1 Corinthians 14:5)**. Paul suggests that the gift of speaking in tongues is not for a particular class of Christians. It is open to all believers. There is no reason why anyone who wants this gift of the Spirit should not receive it. Paul is not saying that everyone needs to speak in tongues; he is saying that it is a beneficial gift. Like all the gifts of God, we have to cooperate with His Spirit. God does not force His gifts on us. We will look at this topic more later in this series.

What are common hindrances to being filled with the Spirit? The answer to that question is *Doubt*. People have many doubts in this area, the principal one being, "If I ask, will I receive?" Jesus said:

⁹“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹²Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:9-13).

“I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you.” The Lord must have seen that they were a little skeptical because He repeated it in a different way: “Seek and you will find.” And again, He said it a third time: “Knock, and the door will be opened to you.” He knows human nature, so He said it differently a fourth time: “For everyone who asks receives” (v. 10). They were still not convinced, so He spoke it a fifth time: “He who seeks finds.” Again, a sixth time: “To him who knocks, the door will be opened.”

Why did He say it six times? Because He knows what we are like. We find it very difficult to believe that God would give us anything—let alone something as unusual and extraordinary as His Holy Spirit and the gifts He brings. Jesus used the analogy of a human father. If a child asks for a fish, no father will give him a snake. If a child asks for an egg, no father would give him a scorpion (Luke 11:11, 12).

Inadequacy

It is essential that there is no unforgiveness or other sin in our lives and that we have turned our back on all that we know is wrong. However, even after doing that, we often have a vague feeling of unworthiness and inadequacy. We cannot believe that God would give *us* anything. We can think that He would give gifts to very mature Christians but not to us. But Jesus does not say, "How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to all very advanced Christians." He says, "**How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to *those who ask him***" (Luke 11:13, Italics added).

I want to say this about God's work in our lives: To be very clear, every believer has an encounter with the Holy Spirit. We know that the Holy Spirit has been at work in the life of every believer because the Father sends the Holy Spirit to convict us of sin and reveal Jesus to us. Jesus said:

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:44).

Even if you were raised in a Christian home and taught about Christ from a young age, you still have a conscious individual choice to follow Christ. Receiving the Holy Spirit is also a conscious experience. When Paul arrived at Ephesus, he asked them if they had received the Holy Spirit since they had believed. He could see that a work of regeneration had already begun in their lives, but he still wanted to pray for them to be filled with the Spirit (Acts 19:2).

Dr. Martin-Lloyd Jones says this about the baptism in the Holy Spirit:

1. It is conscious
2. It is usually subsequent to a person having believed
3. It is the highest form of assurance.

He loved to quote D. L. Moody's experience. Moody was walking down the streets of Brooklyn, New York, when one day, unexpectedly, the Spirit of God came down on him. The experience was so powerful that Moody actually thought he would die. He said, "I asked God to stay His hand, lest he die right on the spot. It was that powerful."

Moody was seeking God and following after Him with a whole heart. Everyone's experience is different, but one constant remains. God gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him and to those who are seeking Him. You need to seek, and you may need to wait. But you will not have to "work it up." The baptism with the Holy Spirit is real. For me, it came at the same time as my conversion. I literally felt liquid waves of love flowing through my body. God healed my emotions at that same time. I was seeking Him but had not been following Him prior to this time. God met me with the revelation of Jesus at the same time as He baptized me in His Spirit. For most people, the Baptism of the Holy Spirit comes at a later time. There is no "one formula." God meets His people where they are and with what they need. When I came to Christ, I was in a situation where I needed power in my life to escape from addiction and harmful behaviors that would have prevented me from following after God. I believe that my powerful conversion experience and being filled with God's Spirit simultaneously was an answer to the hunger of my heart.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote: “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13-14).

What do you think it means to seek God with all your heart?

If you desire the infilling of the Spirit, you may want to find someone who would pray for you, but if you don't have anyone who would be able to pray for you, nothing stops you from praying on your own. If you are praying on your own, ask God to forgive you for anything that could be a barrier to receiving. Also, if you have unforgiveness in your heart against anyone, forgive them with an act of your will. If you need to, do whatever the Holy Spirit prompts you to make things right.

Turn from any area of your life that you know is wrong and ask God to fill you with His Spirit. Go on seeking Him until you find Him. Go on knocking until the door opens. Seek God with all your heart. If you would like to receive the gift of tongues, ask God. Then open your mouth and start to praise God in any language but English or any other language known to you. Believe that what you receive is from God.

Persevere. Languages take time to develop. Most of us start with a minimal vocabulary, and gradually, the gift develops. Tongues are like that. It takes time to develop the gift. But don't give up. If you have prayed for any other gift, seek opportunities to use it. Remember that all gifts of the Spirit are developed by our use of them, and being filled with the Spirit is not a one-time experience. Peter was filled with the Spirit three times in chapters 2-4 in the Book of Acts (Acts 2:4; 4:8; 31). When Paul writes: “Be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18), he uses the present continuous tense, urging them and us to go on and on being filled with the Spirit.

Receiving the Spirit

It is God's purpose to give us the power we need to live as His children, be obedient to Him, and minister His love and power to this needy world. He will not refuse those who seek Him because the Holy Spirit has already been given. Just as Jesus does not have to die on the cross again when a sinner repents, so God does not have to pour out His Spirit again because a believer somewhere decides he needs more power in his life. The Spirit's ministry flowing in our lives awaits those who ask.

Colin Urquhart, in his book “In Christ Jesus,” shares the need to continually be filled with God's Spirit. He writes:

It is Jesus Himself who baptizes or submerges the believer in the Holy Spirit. This event releases the power of the Spirit in his life and enables him to live more fully in the power of his new nature. That release of God's love and power is a definite event in the life of a

Christian. But there is still the need to go on being filled with the Holy Spirit, as Paul makes clear to the Ephesians, and as the disciples themselves realized.²

Despite the great event of Pentecost, when they were baptized in the Holy Spirit, the disciples continued to seek God's empowerment, and He answered their prayers by filling them with the Holy Spirit *again*.

Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly (Acts 4:29-31).

If we are to see God working in powerful ways, we must see the continual release of His Holy Spirit in our lives. He is not concerned with experiences that we claim or particular doctrines of the Holy Spirit that we believe. God wants to see the evidence of His life and power in our lives, along with the rivers of living water flowing freely out of our innermost beings (John 7:38).

Do you desire to know more of the reality of the Holy Spirit in your life? Make time to pray and ask God to move afresh in your life. Seek Him with all your heart and ask him to fill you with His Holy Spirit.

Parts of this study have been adapted from the Alpha Course, written by Nicky Gumbel.

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² Colin Urquhart, *In Christ Jesus*, Printed by Hodder and Stoughton, 1981, Pages 77-78.)