

life in the
Spirit



— Joe Crews

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The greatest need of the church today is for a genuine spiritual revival and reformation. This is what true Christians have been praying for through the years—in the family circle, alone in the closet, and with the church body on Sabbath. There is a deep sense of inadequacy when we sit in a home giving a Bible study or stand before an audience where hundreds need to make a decision for Christ. We know that there is no human way to win a soul or convict of Truth. Only the Holy Spirit can really soften hearts for acceptance and stir the soul with conviction. So we pray as we reach out with weak faltering words that the power of God will break forth in that moment of sharing.

Sometimes, of course, we see the answer to those prayers. People are converted, the sick are raised up, and decisions are made for baptism. But why don't we see it more often? Is this on-again, off-again witness of the Holy Spirit everything we can expect from God? Why doesn't it happen every time we pray and claim the promises?

There are special seasons when our hearts burn within us, and we leave a prayer meeting rejoicing over the refreshing ministry of the Spirit. But how did God feel about that meeting? Was He able to accomplish His perfect will in that service? When the fullness of God's power is revealed no one will go out to talk about it in tame, lifeless tones. Like a fire from heaven the Spirit will flash and illuminate from heart to heart until the earth itself will be lighted with the glory of it.

But why are we still waiting for the fulfillment of the promised Spirit in all its Pentecostal power? Probably not one knowledgeable Christian will contend that the fullness of that promise has been realized today. This is not to say that there have not been exciting glimpses and momentary revelations of that blessing which will bring all other blessing in its train. But hungry, longing Christians everywhere concede that we have only scratched the surface of God's promises.

In fact, there is a general consensus that the church is standing on the threshold of its most unique, predestined mission. The "latter rain" of the Spirit is to provide an explosive entry into the final harvesting phase of the everlasting gospel. And if the exact time of that visitation is not known, there are scores of texts depicting the spiritual consequences of such a breakthrough.

Many believe that the "times of refreshing" have arrived already and that our own lack of faith and preparation has held back the baptism of the Holy Spirit in its final manifestation. When we read the scriptural promises of God's willingness to work through His committed people there seems to be no doubt that the fault lies with us and not with Him.

The inspired description of our assigned role under the Holy Spirit leaves us almost breathless. Words and phrases are used which seem utterly fanatical and super-exaggerated. Our minds are boggled by the incredible scope of the promises that apply to the people of God right now. We blink our eyes and think there must be a mistake, or else there has to be some secret meaning or hidden reservation in the words. Again and again the Bible uses superlative expressions in defining the victorious experience of believers. God does not say that we can be conquerors; He says we can be "*more* than conquerors." He doesn't merely say we can be saved, but rather "saved to the *uttermost*." He will not just cause us to triumph, but "*always* to triumph." Do those words truly mean what they say?

I submit to you that God does not multiply euphonic phrases in order to make an impression. There is builtin, self-fulfilling power in every single promise of the Bible. No matter how extreme the text may sound to our ears, whatever is promised shall be precisely fulfilled as soon as we believe. No matter how impossible it may seem to be, we can believe because God says it.

Consider the extravagant nature of the promise in 2 Peter 1:3, 4. “According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness.” Please notice, first of all, that “divine power” is referring to the Holy Spirit. He has already been sent to continue the work Jesus did while here on the earth. The text does not say that the power “will give,” but “hath given” already. We do not need to look for some possible future supply of power. It is ours *now* for the asking and claiming. We simply need to possess our possessions!

But what has that divine power of the Holy Spirit already made available to us? The text says, “All things that pertain unto life and godliness.” Doesn’t that stagger your mind? It is like a blank check on the bank of heaven, isn’t it? It is not for material things like houses, cars, and lands, but it absolutely includes anything and everything you might need to live a godly life.

Have you longed for victory over sin, for sanctification, holiness, Christlikeness, purity, and perfection of character? It is included in the “all things” of this verse. And don’t try to reason away the words and make them say something besides what they say.

Faith Brings the Power

I repeat that this is a signed check from God drawn on the mighty, inexhaustible resources of the bank of heaven. God tells us to fill it in as to the amount. It is already signed and certified by Him. What a promise! But you might ask, “How is this check to be processed?” The next verse explains the cashing procedures. “Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (verse 4).

There it is! The power is in the promise itself. As soon as we *believe* it our lives may immediately begin to share in His divine nature. Can there be any higher privilege than to actually participate in the very life of our Lord Jesus? His omnipotence is joined to our finite weakness, and we are empowered to live out the victory He gained when “tempted in all points like as we are tempted.” We do not have to yield to corruptions and lusts of the world; we can “escape” them by claiming the “divine power” of that “divine nature.”

Many professed Christians cannot muster the faith to believe promises like this. They prefer to believe that our fallen natures are just too depraved to ever be totally victorious over sin, even through the power of the gospel. What a tragedy! They have to trust the words of Scripture to mean something besides what they actually say. In essence, they are magnifying the power of Satan over the power of God, and making it impossible to ever fully stop sinning.

Incredible Promises

Now consider with me one of the most extraordinary promises found anywhere in the counsels of God. “That he would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, *that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God*” (Ephesians 3:16-19).

It is that last phrase that we need to examine carefully. How could such a statement be true? I don’t begin to grasp the magnitude of those words. In fact, I seem to be standing on the shore of a vast restless ocean, watching the waves receding into infinity. To be filled with all the fullness of God is one of those unsearchable gems of Truth that we can only accept by faith. We will never be able to *understand* it, but we can *believe* it anyway.

What is all the fullness of God? Surely it includes His righteousness, His victory, and His divine nature. We can only begin to comprehend the scope of this promise. Apparently, He wants us to receive and share all that He has. As sons and daughters of God we belong to a royal family, and are fully entitled to participate in all its divine prerogatives.

But now let’s read the grand climax of this pyramid of promises in Ephesians 3. Paul writes, “Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us” (verse 20). And what is that power? The Holy Spirit, of course. When we analyze this verse our amazement increases.

Wouldn't it be wonderful enough if God just promised to give us all that we asked for? Surely such an open-ended offer could be limited only by our reluctance to ask. But our wonderful, beneficent Father assures us in this text that He is willing to give "*above*" all that we ask. He must realize that we are too easily satisfied, and would not be bold enough in our petitions. In fact, He not only will exceed "*all*" our requests for spiritual blessings, but will bestow "*abundantly*" above all we could ask. But that is not all! In the fervency of His love for us, God promises to do "*exceeding abundantly above all*" we could ask. What a dramatic parade of powerful adjectives to describe the spiritual riches so easily available to all of us. And you could add twenty or a hundred more colorful words and it would not make the promise any more certain than it now stands.

If you feel that nothing could make this text more fantastic than what we have already observed, take another look. Two more little words in the verse make it the most astonishing in all the Bible—"or think." Not only will He supply "*exceeding abundantly above all*" we can ask, but even above all we could *imagine* in our wildest dreams. Unbelievable! Sometimes we have deep spiritual longings which are too intense to express. We fear it would be presumptuous to even utter the words. Yet, our loving God desires to surpass the most profound reaching out of the soul for spiritual help. We stand awed and ashamed in the light anointing of the Holy Spirit we may now begin to experience a measure of that quality of life which is designated in the Bible as "eternal life." What an exciting concept! Please keep in mind that we are still only talking about an advance deposit on the real thing, and heaven itself will be far in excess of anything we can experience here.

Purpose of the Latter Rain

But what is the purpose of this baptism of the Spirit's power? We often hear it spoken of as the "times of refreshing," the anointing, the latter rain, or the promise of the Spirit. The Scripture often uses the Middle Eastern terminology for the seed-sowing and harvesting. Soon after planting, a seasonal rain provided moisture for germination and initial growth. This was called the "early rain." Later, near the time for harvest, another copious watering was referred to as the "latter rain." Biblical writers adopted these expressions to describe the

visitation of the Holy Spirit upon the church in a dispensational sense. The “early rain” came at Pentecost to give impetus and vigor to the inaugural witness of the gospel. Another such prodigious outpouring is scheduled near the reaping of earth’s final soul harvest, just prior to Christ’s return.

Some may assume that the purpose of such an end-time bestowal of spiritual blessing is to provide victory over sin, preparatory to translation. But this is not the case. The truth is that no one will receive the “latter rain” who does not already have the victory over sin through the “early rain” deployment of power.

On an individual basis each Christian experiences his own Pentecost at the time of conversion. Under the strength of that spiritual baptism, power is available for complete sanctification. As we consider the purpose of the “latter rain” it becomes even more clear why separation from sin is required under the early rain (conversion) ministrations.

Jesus enunciated clearly why the Spirit is needed in its fullness. “But ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

How interesting that the promised blessing has nothing to do with sensation or personal achievement. It is to qualify believers as witnesses. It is to provide power for them to tell something. A witness, of course, is someone who can personally verify an act or event. No judge would accept the testimony of a witness who had only second or third hand information to share.

What do we have to share from our personal experience that merits the mighty witness of the Spirit of God? I’m afraid that too many of God’s people need something to tell more than they need the power to tell it. They already have all the power they need to tell about their defeat and discouragement.

The Blessing of Abraham

One of the clearest texts in the New Testament gives an exact description of what we are required to know and experience before we can qualify as a Spirit-filled witness. The amazing mandate laid down in this verse identifies the only group who will receive the latter

rain. “That the blessing of Abraham may come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Galatians 3:14).

A careful analysis of this verse reveals that only those who possess the “blessing of Abraham” will receive the “promise of the Spirit.” One thing is given (the blessing of Abraham) in order that we might receive another thing (the promise of the Spirit).

Since this is such a crucial verse we need to study it most carefully. What is the “promise of the Spirit”? We have already determined that it is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in its fullness to empower us for witnessing. But, according to this text, one must first receive the “blessing of Abraham” in order to be baptized with the Spirit. Whatever that “blessing” includes it surely must be the most urgent need of every life. Here is an absolute requirement for every soul who aspires to being filled with the “latter rain” experience.

To understand the blessing of Abraham we must carefully read Romans 4:19-22. “And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about a hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness.”

From these words we understand that the blessing of Abraham was righteousness by faith. Can we reduce that phrase to a more simple equation?

Consider the promise God made to this aged patriarch and his 90-year-old wife. How could Sarah conceive and bear a son when the Scripture clearly states that her womb was dead? Both of them knew, beyond any question, that they were too old to have any children. It was a physical, biological impossibility for Sarah to become a mother. *Yet, God had said she would bear a son!*

What did Sarah finally do as doubts continued to assail her concerning the promise? She proposed to Abraham that he take Hagar, her handmaid, and try to have a son by her! If it worked, at least a part of God’s promise would be fulfilled. It seems that Sarah was trying to bail God out of a very embarrassing situation in which

He had gotten Himself. Even if she couldn't produce the child, it just might be that Abraham could be a father, and thus partially salvage the integrity of God.

As we all now recognize, Abraham did have a son by Hagar whose name was Ishmael, but did God ever acknowledge that son as the child of promise? Never. He came back to the old couple and reaffirmed His promise that they would have a baby. And this time they began to believe that if God said it, the miracle would have to take place. In simple, raw faith they stepped out on the promise as though it had already happened. And, by a creative act of God Sarah brought forth the son from whose descendants the Saviour of the world would be born.

Because of his absolute confidence in the Word of God—trusting it to be fulfilled against all odds—Abraham became the “father of the faithful.” God imputed to him credit for right-doing because he counted things that were not, as though they already existed.

This explains the “blessing of Abraham” as far as the patriarch was concerned, but what is it as far as we are concerned? We have learned from Galatians that none of us can receive the baptism of the Spirit unless we first experience the “blessing of Abraham,” or righteousness by faith, also.

How do we meet this precondition for the Holy Spirit baptism? Have we also had some incredible promises made to us? Indeed we have, and some are so extravagant that we struggle, like Sarah, to believe that they mean what they say.

One such promise is found in 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” What an unrestricted assurance! But how do we know that forgiveness has taken place? Only through faith in the promise. Like Abraham we must accept the Word of God as already accomplished, just because God said so. We refer to that faith transaction by the theological name “justification by faith.” It simply means that through repentance and confession we have been forgiven for all past sins, and have entered the new born-again relationship.

Justification and Sanctification Together

Now the question: Is this experience of justification by faith the same as righteousness by faith? The answer must be no. It is only a part of righteousness by faith, and so the two things are not exactly equivalent. The truth is that we all need more than just forgiveness for the past; we need power for the future also. There are more promises in the Bible, and they apply to victory over sin. For example: “Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory, with exceeding joy” (Jude 24).

What happens when we kneel in faith and claim the power to stop yielding to sin? God places a reservoir of strength in our life, and in that moment we can claim deliverance from any habit of sin. A long theological title has been attached to this experience by the scholars—sanctification. It simply means that God has now entered the life to impart power over the inherited and cultivated tendencies of the fallen nature. Like justification it is also received by faith in the promises.

Now we are ready to put these two faith processes together and get the true definition of righteousness by faith. When justification and sanctification unite to function in an ongoing love relationship with Christ, you see the “blessing of Abraham” in the full sense. Now you really have something to tell! And according to Paul you also qualify to receive the power to tell it.

If you meet someone who has not accepted Christ as Savior you can mightily bear witness to your own personal joy and assurance in Him. You can also give first-person witness to the simple steps that lead from death to life!

On the other hand, if you meet someone who is struggling with a personal weakness or habit, you can powerfully share the secret of claiming victory through the self-fulfilling promises. By experiential involvement in these two prerequisite relationships you are now ready to apply for the final step of Holy Spirit baptism. Please take note that this infilling also is received as “the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Galatians 3:14). This gives us a clear conception of how and when it is bestowed. It must come by promise, and it has to be by faith.

Immediately we can see that many modern churches have a distorted understanding of this subject. Those groups who demand

some physical “evidence” of the baptism are not biblical. Faith and feeling are opposed to each other in this setting. The purpose of this anointing is not for sensation, but for service. To require some sensory or emotional feeling is to negate the explicit designation, “by faith.”

Is this failure to claim the gift of righteousness by faith responsible for the lack of power in the church today? To a very large extent it certainly is true. The Scriptures repeatedly assert that the Holy Spirit cannot dwell with those who are disobedient. “And we are his witnesses of these things and so also is the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him” (Acts 5:32).

The Spirit may convict sinners and draw them to repent, but there can be no ministry of witnessing power until the witness is thoroughly furnished with something to tell. And the Bible defines that something as justification and sanctification. Are there some who have received both of these qualifying experiences who still may not be filled with the promised power? Indeed, it is possible that some have not received simply because they have not asked. We are talking about a very special, specific gift that requires total surrender as well as total faith in asking. Let’s review the steps again which head up to this outpouring of power.

The first level of preparation for this divine anointing is to claim the gift of justification. At that time a measure of the Holy Spirit is supplied to the believer that makes it possible to overcome every inherited or acquired weakness. In the strength of that conversion experience (early rain) the second level of preparation is made possible—sanctification. This consists of appropriating the “early rain” power for Christian character perfection, and reflecting the righteousness of Christ fully. Both justification and sanctification are faith transactions.

Level number three involves an exercise of the same kind of faith for sharing with others the beautiful experiences of levels one and two. It consists of actually claiming the promised power to make our words convicting and fruitful. Nothing is more sterile than a testimony devoid of the Spirit of God, and nothing is more humbling than to see what God can do with the halting speech of a sincere, spirit-filled saint.

Recently a young minister friend told me a story that illustrates what God can and will do for us if we are willing to be used of the

Spirit. Tony had been converted from Catholicism on the streets of New York, and almost immediately he came under an inescapable conviction to be a minister. With two small children and little money there seemed to be no possibility for Tony to attend college or seminary. Yet the call was so strong upon the tender heart of this newborn youth that he decided to step out in faith.

Before enrolling at a Christian college Tony promised the Lord that he would accept every opportunity to speak in front of an audience. He realized how much he needed the experience of thinking on his feet, and articulating his thoughts to a listening congregation.

Soon after moving his family into the college community, Tony learned that there were many small churches surrounding the campus, and that fledgling ministerial students tried their wings in those country chapels. It wasn't very long before Tony was approached on a Friday afternoon with an invitation to preach in one of those churches. Although he had only the evening hours to prepare for the Sabbath appointment, Tony remembered his promise to seize every opportunity for speaking. So he accepted the appointment. He did his best to put a sermon outline together as he prayed and studied late into the night. But, alas, he was only able to produce notes for a ten-minute message at the most. Hoping against hope that he might be able to pull some more thoughts into his sermon notes during the Sabbath School class study, Tony left early the next morning for the frightening rendezvous. As a very immature young Christian he had almost no previous experience in pulpit speaking and was almost paralyzed with fear that his ten-minute sermon would be more humiliating than enlightening.

Arriving at the church, Tony slipped into one of the classrooms, hoping for a chance to blend with the group and study his meager notes during the lesson. But it was not to be. In the class that day was an obstreperous man who was creating turmoil. He constantly disputed points with the hard-pressed lady teacher and seemed to do everything possible to embarrass her. Tony spent much of the class time helping her fend off the man's distracting and irrelevant attacks against the issues under discussion.

Afterward as he waited to walk onto the platform Tony's mind was still whirling from the emotional confrontation, and even his brief sermon outline was not very clear in his thinking. With earnest prayer

he committed himself to God and stepped up to the podium.

Somehow Tony struggled through the ten minutes of sermon notes, and just as he stood desperately groping for further words a loud anguished cry came from the audience. Looking down the center aisle Tony saw that a man had fallen out of his seat at the end of the pew and was crawling on hands and knees toward the front of the church. He was weeping at the top of his voice, and his wife was trying in vain to pull him back toward his seat.

One quick glance identified the man as the relentless debater in the Sabbath School class. By then, between broken sobs, he was pleading that the church pray for him. “Your sermon has spoken to my heart and the Holy Spirit has convicted me of my sins. I’ve been breaking God’s law and now I want to make things right. Please pray for me.”

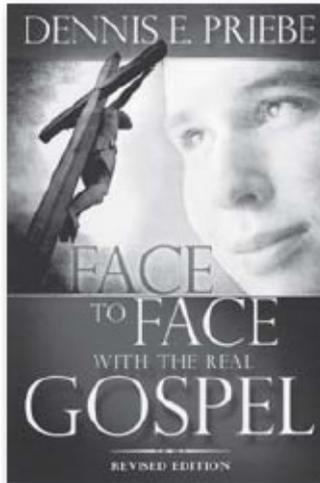
In a moment the congregation melted into tears also, and the meeting closed on a glorious note of victory as the audience joined hearts and hands to pray for the penitent seeker.

What an encouragement for a young preacher! Tony told me that he could not even remember a word he spoke that day. But God simply added the Holy Spirit to the stammering efforts of a surrendered heart, and a miracle resulted. When Tony returned to that church a year later he found that man serving as the head elder of the congregation.

Do you see now what a difference it makes to be filled with the Spirit? This is God’s will for every one of us and He has made it possible through the beautiful promise of Galatians 3:14. Reach out right now and fasten your faith on the blessing of Abraham. In the strength of that righteousness, imputed and imparted by faith, you may be empowered to speak words that will change lives.

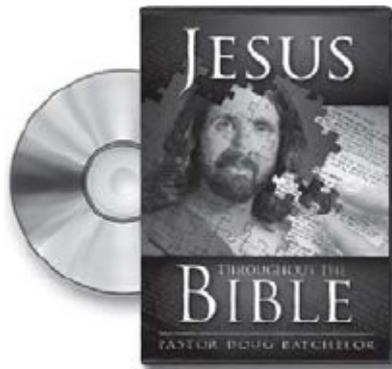
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