



## Lesson 4

# Strength for the Journey Empowered by the Spirit

In previous lessons, we've seen over and over our dependence upon the grace of God in the Christian life. The very plan of salvation is the story of God's gracious initiative to send His Son to die on the cross for sinners who were as yet in rebellion against God. Having responded to the gospel, Christians then learn that their response was actually rooted in God's gracious choosing and calling of them before the foundation of the earth. In the fight for holiness, (see Lesson 3), we find that all our efforts have their start in the sanctifying work of God, who "works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). The Christian life is truly "all of grace, from first to last."

Because of this, God never intended believers merely to "trudge on" in their own strength. Indeed, one of the great promises of Scripture comes at the very end of the book of Matthew, just after the giving of the Great Commission: "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). In this lesson, we will explore more fully the source of strength for the Christian journey: the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

## I. The Holy Spirit: God's Active Presence

A. While God is omnipresent (present at all places at all times with all of His being), He makes His presence known in different ways for different purposes.

- He can be present to bless, to sustain, to punish, or to empower.

B. God manifested His presence in various ways throughout history, but these reached a climax in the person of Jesus Christ.

*John 1:1, 14: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

C. In the church age, God's presence is primarily manifested in the world, and especially in the church, in the person of the Holy Spirit.

*John 14:16-18: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."*

"The work of the Holy Spirit is to manifest the active presence of God in the world, and especially in the church." —Wayne Grudem

- D. Christians have the great privilege, not only of trusting in God's omnipresence, but of personally experiencing His nearness.

*Romans 8:15-16: "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God..."*

*James 4:8: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."*

- E. God's active presence among His people accomplishes many things. It is not uncommon to focus narrowly on more dramatic aspects of this, such as miracles, healings, or prophecy. Scripture, however, portrays the Spirit's work as pervasive and multifaceted—what might be called "the broad work of the Spirit". To fully appreciate God's active presence, we need to recognize the countless ways in which the Spirit is at work in and among us.

"...the Spirit's major role in Paul's view of things lies with his being the absolutely essential constituent of the whole of Christian life, from beginning to end. The Spirit thus empowers ethical life in all of its dimensions—personal, corporate, and in the world. Believers in Christ, who for Paul are "Spirit people" first and foremost, are variously described as living by the Spirit, walking in the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, and sowing to the Spirit... the Spirit conforms the believer into the likeness of Christ to the glory of God. The Spirit is therefore the empowering presence of God for living the life of God in the present." —Gordon Fee

## II. The Holy Spirit: God's Saving Presence

The New Birth. The greatest miracle one can ever experience is the miracle of regeneration, in which the Holy Spirit changes our nature and imparts spiritual life to us. Nothing can ever compare with this mighty work of the Spirit in our lives.

*Titus 3:4-7: "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."*

## III. The Holy Spirit: God's Purifying Presence

- A. *The Holy Spirit.* One of the Spirit's primary activities is to remove sin from our lives and to make us more and more holy, just as God Himself is holy.

*2 Cor. 3:18: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."*

See Lesson 3: Progress on the Journey—Sanctification

- B. *The Fruit of the Spirit.* As the believer cooperates with the work of the Spirit in his life, the Spirit produces "fruit" in his life, consisting of godly attitudes and behavior. This supernatural work is the opposite of our natural tendencies, and is the reproduction of the life of Christ in the believer.

*Galatians 5:16, 22-23: "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh...But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."*

## IV. The Holy Spirit: God's Empowering Presence

In addition to effecting regeneration and sanctification, the Holy Spirit also empowers believers for Christian witness and service. The inaugural experience of this empowering work is often referred to as being "baptized in (or with) the Holy Spirit". (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

A. To be baptized in the Spirit is to be immersed in the Holy Spirit by the risen Christ, resulting in an awareness of God and empowerment for Christian life and ministry.

1. This "immersion" is foretold by John the Baptist in each of the four gospels (Matthew 3.11; Mark 1.8; Luke 3.16 and John 1.33) and by Jesus (Acts 1.4-5). It is the "promise of the Father"—God's empowering presence for the new covenant age.

*Acts 1:4-5, 8: "And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, 'you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'...But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."*

2. The purpose of this activity of God's Spirit is spiritual empowerment, both to stimulate consistent growth in godliness and to enable the believer to bear witness concerning the gospel and to serve the Lord with spiritual power.

*Galatians 5:16: "But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."*

*Acts 1:8: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."*

B. Baptism in the Spirit is only the beginning of a process of empowerment that God desires for every believer.

1. The New Testament envisions a process of repeated, continual *fillings* of God's Spirit throughout the believer's life.

*Acts 4:8, 31: "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them...And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness."*

2. The Holy Spirit desires to fill each believer continually with increased power for Christian life and witness. Our responsibility and privilege is to live a life of dependence upon God, asking for His Spirit to continually fill us, to empower us, and to strengthen us to live lives for His glory.

*Ephesians 5:18: "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit..."*

"Being continually filled with the Spirit is, in fact, the challenge of a lifetime and the challenge of each new day." —Anthony Hoekema

"Here the Spirit is free to move again and again, as all of life is progressively scented with the presence and wonder of Almighty God." -- Rodman Williams

- C. There are differing views among Christians as to when a person is baptized in the Holy Spirit. Some believe it occurs at regeneration, while others hold that it is an experience distinct from regeneration. Transcending these differences are certain, clear truths of Scripture that all Christians can affirm: God promises the Holy Spirit to every Christian and desires every Christian to experience the Spirit's empowering presence for life and witness.

At Sovereign Grace Church, we have found it possible to accommodate Christians who differ on this issue when these beliefs are communicated in humility and common values concerning the Spirit's ministry are cherished, and applied. These common values are what is most important to us as a church, including:

- A recognition of the need for ongoing empowerment by the Spirit in the Christian life.
- A belief that Christians are to seek to be continually filled by the Spirit.
- A life of constant dependence upon the Holy Spirit.
- A faith-filled pursuit of those things that are indicative of being filled with the Spirit: a genuine love for God, a hunger for His Word, an increasing manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, a love for fellowship, a burden for the lost, and a boldness in Christian witness.
- A belief in the continuity of the spiritual gifts listed in Scripture, and an earnest desire for whatever gifts the Spirit would graciously give.
- A love for, and pursuit of, the active presence of God.

"We are not left on our own as far as our relationship with God is concerned; neither are we left on our own to 'slug it out in the trenches' as it were, with regard to the Christian life. Life in the present is empowered by the God who dwells among us and in us." -- Gordon Fee

#### D. Spiritual Gifts

In addition to giving us increased boldness and effectiveness in witness (Acts 4:31), prompting worship and thanksgiving in our hearts (Eph. 5:18-20; Acts 10:46), increasing our growth in godliness (2 Cor. 3:18), and strengthening our relationship with other believers (Eph. 5:18, 21), the Holy Spirit also imparts supernatural gifts for the edification of the church and for works of ministry in the world.

1. All believers have and receive spiritual gifts.

*1 Cor. 12:7: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."*

2. All of the gifts are supernatural. In Scripture, all of the gifts, from seemingly "natural" ones like mercy and serving to "supernatural" ones like healing, are viewed as being from God and empowered by the Spirit.

*1 Cor. 12:7: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."*

3. All of the gifts of the Holy Spirit at work in the church of the first-century are available today. Scripture suggests that the gifts are given to the church until Christ's return, and there is no indication anywhere in Scripture that any of the gifts were intended to pass away with the early church. 1 Cor. 1:7-8: "so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."

4. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are vital for the mission of the church and are to be earnestly desired and practiced.

*1 Cor. 14:1: "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy."*

5. The purpose of spiritual gifts is the glory of God and the edification of other believers.

*1 Corinthians 10:31: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."*

*1 Corinthians 12:7: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."*

"Look at the New Testament Christian, look at the New Testament church, and you see it vibrant with spiritual life, and, of course, it is always life that tends to lead to excesses. There is no problem of discipline in a graveyard; there is no problem very much in a formal church. The problems arise when there is life...We must not interpret the Scriptures in light of our experiences, but we should examine our experiences in light of the teaching of Scripture." --Martyn Lloyd-Jones

## V. Pursuing God's Empowering Presence

Because God invites us to draw near to Him (Heb. 4:16; Jas. 4:8) and commands us to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18), we can have confidence that He will respond to our pursuit of Him.

- A. Diligently practice the spiritual disciplines, especially the study of God's word, prayer, and worship.
  1. Amazingly, God desires an intimate relationship with us, and the spiritual disciplines are means God has given us to commune with Him, receive His grace, and grow in godliness.

"The Spiritual Disciplines then are also like a channel of God's transforming grace. As we place ourselves in them to seek communion with Christ, His grace flows to us and we are changed. That's why the disciplines must be come priority for us if we will be godly." —Donald Whitney

2. The Bible is God's self-revelation to man. In it we learn what God is like and how we are to respond to Him. There is no more important activity for the Christian than reading and meditating upon the word of God.

3. Prayer is communication with God. It is the lifting up of our hearts, thoughts, and desires to God. When we pray, we communicate with God, and He communicates with us. For our part, we communicate our gratitude, confess our sins, submit our wills, present our requests, and pour out our worship. We also listen, allowing God to give us divine perspective on our lives, search our hearts for sin, illumine our minds with His truth, encourage our souls with His promises, and assure us of His love through Christ.

B. Recognize the value of the corporate gathering of the church for experiencing a fresh infilling of the Spirit.

While private devotions are crucial for the Christian life, God is pleased to reveal His active presence in corporate meetings in ways we don't normally experience when we're alone.

"God will manifest His presence to you in congregational worship in ways you can never know even in the most glorious secret worship. That's because you are not only a temple of God as an individual, but the Bible says (and far more often) that Christians collectively are God's temple...God manifests His presence in different ways to the "living stones" of His temple when they are gathered than He does to them when they are apart." —Donald Whitney

C. Our Sunday Celebration

In the life of this church, nothing exceeds the importance of our Sunday morning corporate meetings. These times provide a context where we can worship God together, hear the word of God proclaimed and taught, and be built together in our mission as a church.

Each Sunday has three primary goals:

1. **Worship: *Ministering to God.*** There is no higher calling for the people of God than to worship and glorify Him together. Our Sunday meetings provide the opportunity to glorify God, to declare His perfections, to praise His name, and to adore Him together.
2. **Equipping: *Receiving from God.*** Although the main purpose of worship is exalting God, corporate worship is nonetheless a means by which we encounter God together and are refreshed by His presence, strengthened by His grace, encouraged by His promises, and transformed by His truth. These things occur as we worship God through song, encounter Him by gifts of the Spirit and through the preaching of God's word.
3. **Fellowship: *Sharing our current experience with God.*** Believers are given the privilege of caring for, encouraging, and building up each other. Each Sunday is an opportunity for us to be a means of grace through greeting, prayer, encouragement, prophesy, sharing Scriptures, and in a multitude of other ways.

D. Other Corporate Contexts

In Sovereign Grace, there are a variety of other gatherings that take place within various ministry spheres: 316/Parent Teen Ministry, ACCESS Singles Ministry, Bible for Life Classes. Care Groups also play a critical role in our life together as a church. Each of these contexts provides opportunities for us to experience God's active presence together as we seek Him

through worship, the teaching and application of God's word, and fellowship with each other.

## **VI. God's Active Presence: Our Privilege and Need**

"For Paul, the Spirit as an experienced and living reality was the absolutely crucial matter for the Christian life, from beginning to end. For the Christian life can only be lived in and by and through the power of the Holy Spirit." --Gordon Fee

As believers, we should never be satisfied with anything less than the nearness of God—His active presence. He has promised to draw near to us, and He empowers us by the Holy Spirit to glorify Him and serve Him more effectively as He accomplishes His purposes through the church. To be a Christian is to be marked by the presence of God, and how gracious He is to give us the Holy Spirit to empower us for our lives, our service to Him, and our life together as a church. How desperately we need this. And how wondrous it is that we can pursue this in faith, and do so together.