

A person in a grey hoodie and green pants stands on the peak of a red rock formation, looking out over a vast desert landscape. The sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds. The overall scene conveys a sense of solitude and reflection.

May/June 2021

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

LIFE IN
THE SPIRIT

ALSO: EXPERIENCING JESUS

Dear Friends:

Are you familiar with the book of Revelation in the Bible? This book is a letter from John, one of Jesus' closest followers. This letter at the end of the Bible is filled with some stunningly beautiful passages, and the book as a whole is sometimes puzzling and hard to apply to our lives.



In the month of May, Pastor Jim Poelman opens Revelation for us by exploring how this word of revelation from God still speaks powerfully to our daily lives today—with a message of hope in the midst of so much turmoil and uncertainty in our world.

Then, in the month of June, Pastor Dean Deppe, a New Testament teacher, explores life in the Spirit. All of us want love, joy, peace, and the things that give meaning and purpose to our lives. But the truth is that only when we live in a right and close relationship with God can we truly find meaning and purpose in life. This new life comes through the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Through God's Holy Spirit, we begin living in eternity even now because the Spirit lives in us and unites us through Jesus Christ with the God who loves us.

May God's Word refresh, refocus, and renew you each day!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

—Kurt Selles

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“Experiencing Jesus”
Jim Poelman



“Life in the Spirit”
Dean Deppe

Managing Editor: Jeff Bulthuis
Executive Editor: Kurt Selles

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ReFrame
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june

Life in the Spirit

Dean Deppe

Everyone wants a life filled with love, joy, peace, and other things that give us meaning and purpose for living. But these things can be really hard to find. Many of us, after years of searching and trying one idea after another, remain dissatisfied. That's because only life in the presence of God really fills our souls with meaning.

Having the rich, intimate presence of God in our lives is called life in the Spirit. The Spirit of God himself comes to live in us, and life in God's presence is the best life possible. It's the way God created our lives to be.

This month let's explore life in the Spirit, and we'll find a quality of life that cannot be compared with anything else. With the Spirit, we begin living in eternity even now because of the presence of the eternal Spirit living within us.

Dean Deppe taught New Testament theology at Calvin Theological Seminary and served as a pastor of churches in inner-city Grand Rapids, Michigan; suburban Toledo, Ohio; and rural Prinsburg, Minnesota. He has been married to Julie for 47 years, and they have four children and five grandchildren.

THE PROMISE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

"If 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 11:13

God promised the coming of the Holy Spirit about 400 years before the events in our reading for today in Acts 2. God's promises always come true. In earlier times (the Old Testament period) the Spirit of God came mainly on prophets, priests, and kings. But on Pentecost the Spirit became a gift for everyone. This means that all of us can experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

You don't have to be special. You don't have to be perfect. The gift of the Holy Spirit is for you.

To receive the Holy Spirit, the first generation of Christians had to wait 50 days after Jesus' resurrection (Easter), which took place at the end of the traditional Passover celebration. That is why the day is called Pentecost.

But we don't have to wait. The Spirit is a gift that we can have right now. And the blessings we receive by the Spirit's coming into our lives are so many that it takes a lifetime to begin to understand them all. Still, we can understand enough to have our lives filled with love, joy, peace, and much more.

I suggest that you use the formula ABC backwards: **C**onfess your sin to God (Acts 2:38). **B**elieve that God will forgive you, because Jesus has paid the price for all our sin. **A**sk for the Holy Spirit. And no matter who you are, God will give you the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Thank you, Lord, for being true to your Word and for giving us the Spirit through faith in Jesus. Amen.

THE HOLY GHOST

"What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"— . . . these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.

—1 Corinthians 2:9-10

Christians used to refer to the Holy Spirit as the Holy Ghost. We probably dropped that term because ghosts are scary, while the Holy Spirit can be our best friend and continuous companion. But maybe we lost some of the mystery of life in the Spirit when we left the word "ghost" behind.

There is a mysterious spiritual world out there beyond what we see with our eyes and hear with our ears. But we can connect with that world when we surrender our life to Christ and are filled with new life in the Holy Spirit.

The Bible explains that the natural person cannot understand the things of the Spirit because they are spiritually discerned. When we seek only material blessings, we miss the greatest blessing of all. When we look only at the world around us,

we miss a spiritual reality that is close, real, and available: life in the Spirit.

Come and explore this mysterious reality made concrete by God's revelation in the Bible. Come and meet the person of the Spirit of God. The Spirit is a person, and he wants a personal relationship with you. The Spirit of God wants to fill you, empower you, teach you, enlighten you, lead you, groan with you, pray through you, and even sing through you.

The Holy Spirit has marvelous gifts for you and tasty fruit that people around you will crave.

Spirit of Jesus, open my eyes to life in the Spirit. May I not miss the hidden wisdom of God by settling for mere glimmers in the natural world around me. Amen.

A SPIRITUAL PERSON

What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us.
—1 Corinthians 2:12

I think the apostle Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 2 is one of the deepest in the Bible. If you have experienced what Paul talks about here, you know the Holy Spirit. This is divine wisdom for the mature (2:6).

Paul explains that the Spirit searches "even the deep things of God." Wow! All who God is, all that God knows, all that God has experienced in the entire universe of galaxies, the Spirit has explored. And what does the Spirit do with that intimate knowledge of God's thoughts? He communicates to us.

The Holy Spirit enables us to understand God—his holiness so that we fall on our face before him; his unconditional love so that tears of joy overwhelm us; his tender mercy so that we shake our heads at the mystery of God's grace.

The Spirit enables us to understand the blessings freely given us by God. The Spirit reveals our identity in Christ, what it means to be a new creature. The Spirit opens up the Word of God not only so that we can understand the depth of God's revelation, but also to enable us to teach these truths to others. The Spirit shapes and molds us into spiritual people so that we can explain spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.

Do you want to be a person shaped by the Holy Spirit? Let the Holy Spirit capture your heart so that you can share the depths of God with others.

Holy Spirit, open my mind so that you can begin to reveal to me the depths of God, that I may also share your wisdom with others. Amen.

TEMPLES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?

—1 Corinthians 6:19

What does it mean that the Spirit of God is called the Holy Spirit? For one thing, he stands in contrast with evil spirits that draw us away from God, tempt us to sin, and influence us to be rebellious against God. But he is also called the Holy Spirit because he makes us holy.

The Bible talks not only about people who have no natural idea about the things of the Spirit, but also about people who follow after the sinful nature, the “desires of the flesh.” These are people who live completely opposite to the way God calls us to live. They act with sexual immorality, impurity, idolatry, hatred, divisiveness, jealousy, rage, selfish ambition, and so on (Galatians 5:19-20).

But the Holy Spirit fills us so that our physical bodies become temples of the Holy Spirit. We

become holy, set apart, for the special use of God himself. This truth has many implications. Temples are for worship, so praise for God should always arise from our lives. As God’s temples, we are not our own but are called to be living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God (Romans 12:1).

The church is the body of Christ, so it too is holy. Every believer in Christ is a part of that body and is a temple too. When we realize that the Holy Spirit has made us holy temples, we honor God with our bodies, and we honor all Christians as the body of Christ.

Holy Spirit, purify my thoughts; take charge of my body and my life so that I am holy in body, soul, and spirit. Amen.

THE CREATING SPIRIT

"The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."
—Luke 1:35

The Holy Spirit is extremely creative. And because we have the Spirit in us, we will become creative as well.

The Spirit was creative in the beginning. God spoke the world into existence through his Word, Jesus (John 1:1-3), and with his thoughtful, attentive, creative Spirit (Genesis 1:2). Look around the world at all the variety of plants, the amazing assortment of animals, and the diverse colors and languages of people—and you will see the creative power of the Spirit.

But the Holy Spirit wasn't finished. The Spirit created a living Messiah in the womb of the virgin Mary. The angel said, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

But the Holy Spirit wasn't finished. The Spirit breathed life back into Jesus' body on the

Sunday morning (Easter) after Jesus' death on the cross (on Good Friday). Jesus rose in victory over death, and all who believe in him will rise again too—to live with him on the new earth when he comes again (1 Corinthians 15:20-23; Revelation 21:1-5).

The Spirit *still isn't finished* today. He is breathing creativity into you and me—creative thoughts to instill new vision into the church; creative words to share the gospel; creative ministries to bring the presence of Jesus into our culture and world.

The Holy Spirit is at work.

"Creator Spirit, by whose aid the world foundations first were laid," come and pour your joy and creativity on all humankind! In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE SPIRIT CONTINUOUSLY FILLS US

"Repent and be baptized, every one of you. . . . And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."
—Acts 2:38

Some Christians teach that there is a second blessing of the Holy Spirit beyond the indwelling of the Spirit. Other Christians insist that there is a third blessing that instills holiness in the believer. Well, the blessings of the Spirit are actually so many that we can barely count or keep track of them.

The Bible teaches that all of us are baptized in the Spirit when we receive Christ into our lives. Then we spend all the rest of our lives appropriating the blessings of the Spirit.

This can mean a gift of power from God to witness to others about Christ. It can mean a charismatic experience with the gift of tongues. It can mean a Romans 6 experience where we realize that our old life has been crucified with Christ and we have been raised to new life in him. For example, after struggling with a particular sin, I had a vision of a coffin, and when

the lid opened, I was inside, dead. I needed to remember that my old, sinful self is dead. Now, when I am tempted, I confess that I have been crucified with Christ, who now lives in me (see Galatians 2:20).

There are many more blessings too. Someone receives discernment and begins to recognize the work of Satan in the world. Someone is taught by the Spirit and writes a book that stimulates thousands of people to spiritual growth.

We need to be careful, however, to avoid divisive and false ideas about different levels of spirituality. That is not from the Holy Spirit but only misleading human teaching.

Spirit of God, please fill us continuously and help us to give glory and honor to you alone. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE BLESSINGS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

"Whoever believes in me . . . rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit. . . . —John 7:38-39

The Holy Spirit has taken on various forms that symbolize important blessings we receive when he lives within us. The Spirit comes as a dove and fills us with peace and holy contentment. We hear the voice of the Father, as when the dove came upon Jesus at his baptism: "You are my [child], whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22).

On Pentecost the Spirit descended with tongues of fire (Acts 2:3), and the fire of the Spirit purifies us by burning away our selfish habits, our coarse language, our stubborn ingratitude, and our lack of grace in relationships.

As the disciples of Jesus spoke in many languages on Pentecost, some of the onlookers thought they were drunk (Acts 2:13). Why? Because the other languages sounded like babbling to them—but not to the people who understood those languages! And people

who are filled with the Spirit overflow with joy and cannot stop talking about Jesus, the greatest treasure in the world.

We experience the Spirit also as a comforter who comes to our aid and as a lawyer who defends us in situations of distress (John 14:15-27; 15:26).

The Spirit is also described as a river of living water. Like a spring bubbling up within us, the living water of the Spirit ensures that we will never be thirsty again (John 4:13-14).

Life in the Spirit is truly an abundant existence. And this is normal in the Christian life.

Holy Spirit, be our dove of peace, our baptism of fire, our translator and joy giver, our comforter and defending lawyer, and our water of life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses."
—Acts 1:8

My testimony depends on the power of the Spirit, not on my own abilities or strength of will. When two friends in college invited me to spend six weeks traveling in the Rocky Mountains and sharing our faith, I thought I was prepared because I had been trained in evangelism.

We practiced some songs that we planned to share around a campfire along with our personal stories about our faith. But when I tried to testify about my faith, nothing happened. The harder I tried, the more frustrated I became.

As we traveled, we heard about a coffeehouse where people were being saved every week. The head of the coffeehouse said something that I have not forgotten: "The only person who can live the Christian life is Jesus Christ."

I realized I would have to give up trying to live the Christian

life on my own and to ask the Holy Spirit to live through me. As I did that, the power of the Spirit filled me. My mouth overflowed with praise, and I saw a heavenly vision of thousands of people on their knees worshipping a lamb on a distant throne.

The trip totally changed after that. I would begin talking with people, and they would become convicted of a need in their life. I would pray for them, and the Spirit would transform their lives. When I got back to college, I began sharing with old friends, and their lives began to change.

It is true. There is a power to witness that comes only from the Holy Spirit.

Spirit, lead us to surrender our lives to you, and please empower us to be your witnesses. Amen.

GOVERNED BY THE SPIRIT

The mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

—Romans 7:5

Romans 8 is a key chapter about life in the Spirit. And to understand it, we need the background of Romans 6-7.

In these chapters, the apostle Paul explains that before life in the Spirit occurs, we need to give up trying to control our own lives. We need to be “crucified” with Christ so that we are no longer “slaves to sin” (Romans 6:6). We also need to realize that when we live as slaves to sin—and this includes trying to live by God’s law on our own—we will always fail. We will find that (1) we cannot do the good that we want to do, and (2) we will keep on doing the bad that we do not want to do (Romans 7:14-23).

Is there any way we can be freed from this mess? “Thanks be to God!” Yes! (Romans 7:25)—and only by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. When we trust

in God’s power to save us, we receive new life in the Spirit, and we depend on the Spirit to lead and guide us always.

If we are governed or controlled “by the flesh,” that means we are trying to live by our own strength or under our own direction. Every day, we need to ask the Spirit to fill us and direct us.

Life in the Spirit means that the Holy Spirit accomplishes what we cannot do ourselves. Just as we must depend on and trust in God’s grace through Jesus to save us, so we must depend on and trust the Spirit to guide and govern us each day. And in his power we no longer struggle but find rest.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, help us to depend completely on your power to save us and to guide us. Amen.

THE LIFE-GIVING SPIRIT

Even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. —Romans 8:10

The Spirit gives life, and he comes to live inside us. The Spirit gives energy, like a wind that carries us along. The Spirit brings refreshment, like a new breath within us so that our spiritual lungs are bursting with the fresh air of God. We are motivated, dynamic, filled with enthusiasm.

In our new life in Christ we are no longer in slavery to trying to keep the law (Romans 8:1-4). Because of Christ's finished work we are credited with his righteousness (Romans 3-4). As Paul puts it, "even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness"—that is, because of the righteousness of Christ.

The life-giving Spirit gives us freedom. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). In fact, life in the Spirit is getting bet-

ter all the time because we are gradually being transformed to become more and more like Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18).

So we should never give in to the danger of legalism. Trying to live by the law instead of living by the Spirit can easily creep into our lives. Some years ago, when I had the opportunity to preach in Moscow, a man rushed forward insisting that I should not be allowed to preach because I was not wearing a suit. But later, in the middle of my sermon, a woman rushed forward to surrender her life to God for the first time. Don't let legalism confuse your spirituality. Instead, live in the freedom of the Holy Spirit.

Life-giving Spirit, fill us with the abundant life of freedom in Christ Jesus. Amen.

LED BY THE SPIRIT

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

—Galatians 5:25

Permit me to use myself as an example of being led by the Spirit, since I am totally in awe that the Lord would speak to a person like me.

One spiritual communication with God that changed my life occurred after a college chapel service while I was praying with a young woman. The Lord began to speak to me in a very concrete way: “This is the woman you will marry someday.” I hardly knew this woman, and my first impressions were rather negative. But the Lord had a special companion in mind for me, and year after year she has proven to be his perfect gift.

While serving as a pastor in Ohio, I received a call from a church in Prinsburg, Minnesota. I had never pictured myself living in a rural farming community where the stores are 15 miles away, so I declined the call. But the church was convinced that

I was going to be their pastor. During this time I took my kids to a movie, and in the middle of the story, the Lord spoke to my spirit, pointing out that Prinsburg is beautiful to him. Our time in Prinsburg proved to be among the best years of our life.

Some years later during a Promise Keepers meeting in Atlanta, the Lord spoke to me about another calling. During the Lord’s Supper one evening, the Lord said to me, “Get ready, you are going to teach at Calvin Seminary.” And two years later that happened.

I’m thankful for these opportunities, and they remind me to keep in step with the Spirit.

Lord and God, enable us to keep our spiritual eyes open to watch for the leading of your Spirit. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

THE AFFIRMATION OF THE SPIRIT

The Spirit himself testifies with our Spirit that we are God's children.
—Romans 8:16

I remember Eileen. With her whole heart she desired to experience the power of the Holy Spirit. But she often wrote negative letters to herself about how ugly, stupid, and sinful she was. Her negative self-image led her to hold back from fully embracing God's promise of life in the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit of God, though, is the great encourager. He is constantly whispering words of affirmation into our consciousness. The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God—and that means we are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.

Already in the amazing chapter of Romans 8 we have learned that there is “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1). We have been set free from the law of sin and death by the law of the Spirit of life (8:2). The righteous re-

quirement of the law has already been fully met, through Christ, so that we can walk by the Spirit (8:4).

The Spirit instills a new attitude deep in our spirit. We learn, through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus and in the outpouring of new life in the Spirit, that God loves us even more than we can imagine (John 3:16; Romans 5:8-11; Ephesians 3:16-21). And God has poured his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5).

Let us always remember that the Spirit of God is our best and closest friend.

Spirit of God, fill us with your affirmation and love, assuring us that we are loved even more than we can imagine. In the powerful name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

THE GROANING OF THE SPIRIT

We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. —Romans 8:26

Romans 8 speaks of a three-fold groaning in our world.

The creation is groaning like a woman in childbirth to be set free from decay. Earthquakes and hurricanes ravage the earth. We cannot fish in many rivers because they are polluted. Our use of fossil fuels is ruining the ozone layer that protects us from excessive radiation from the sun. Can you hear the restless and anguished groans of creation?

Likewise, Spirit-filled believers are groaning. Cancer devastates our bodies. Racial injustice attacks our communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has disabled our nations and killed many, many people while increasing opportunities for abuse. Can you hear the grief-stricken sobs and cries of God's people?

Along with us, the Holy Spirit is also groaning while interceding for us in ways that only God can understand. And the

Spirit's groaning changes everything, because it enables both creation and us to have hope and to wait patiently.

Paul concludes that the creation waits expectantly for the children of God to be revealed, when it will be freed from its bondage to decay (Romans 8:19-21). Likewise, as Spirit-filled Christians, we hope for what we do not see and therefore wait patiently (8:25).

How are you doing as you groan over all the effects of sin in this world? Do you hear the Spirit groaning along with you? Groaning yet hopeful—that's the life we have as God's children on this earth.

Holy Spirit, intercede for us, that we may help to bring others hope as we await the full coming of your kingdom. Amen.

TAUGHT BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

"When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth."
—John 16:13

In the book *A Testament of Devotion* Thomas Kelly describes how a believer can live at two levels at once: "On one level we may be thinking, discussing . . . calculating . . . all the demands of external affairs, but deep within . . . we may also be in prayer and adoration . . . and [have] a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings."

This enables us to be taught by the Holy Spirit. While I am speaking to another person, the Spirit can remind me to take a word that was said and turn the conversation in a spiritual direction. While I am figuring out my monthly budget, the Spirit can speak to me about giving to help in the work of God's kingdom. While I am watching sports on TV, a divine breathing within me can suggest that my routine is more controlled by the sports calendar than by the church year.

The teachings of the Spirit are wonderfully simple and to the point. Watchman Nee, a Chinese church leader and Christian teacher, was taught by the Spirit when he gave a simple illustration explaining how to conquer sin and the desires of the flesh. We may suppose, he said, that removing a spider web from the basement will eliminate our problem. But, no, we have to remove the spider. Likewise, to ask for forgiveness for our sin is not enough. We need to have the old, sinful self within us crucified (Romans 6:6). And Jesus did that for us on the cross.

What has the Spirit been teaching you?

Holy Spirit, enlighten me to understand your teaching, and guide me in all my daily experiences to live for you. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

THE CONVICTING SPIRIT

[The Spirit] will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment. . . .
—John 16:8

The Holy Spirit speaks to the human conscience and convicts us of sin, wrong life decisions, and potential dangers.

I am a collector of tournament golf balls and varieties of hosta plants. Recently I've been convicted that these hobbies can take away from more important pursuits like caring for people and practicing social justice. Even though our hosta collection reminds me of the Garden of Eden, and even if golf is a great game filled with aesthetic beauty, these things can become distractions. And anything that distracts us from serving God faithfully can become an idol.

The Holy Spirit can also work through us to convict the world of righteousness and judgment. In fact, this should happen through the church. The way we live should be so pure, reflecting the righteousness of Christ, and our truth

telling should be so pointed that the culture around us will be called to account.

Lies, cheating, and corruption will be exposed by the pursuit of truth and integrity. Systemic racism will be exposed by the teaching that all people are created in God's image and equally valued by God. Our culture's flippancy about the value of life and the unborn will be judged. Forgiveness, reconciliation, and cooperation will convict people of the false values of competing against each other for superiority and getting ahead rather than serving others in Jesus' name.

Spirit, convict us of the changes needed in our lives, and guide us to live with Christ's righteousness, that the evils in the world will be exposed. Amen.

PRAY AND SING IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

Dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in God's love. . . .
—Jude 20–21

How do we remain loving people in the midst of conflict, negativity, broken relationships, and attacks by the devil? Jude explains that we can do this by building ourselves up in faith and praying in the Holy Spirit. We know we are praying in the Spirit when the comfort, peace, and strength of God fill us. We know we are praying in the Spirit when we drop our selfish agenda in favor of serving God, showing his love and care for others.

In Ephesians 6:18 the apostle Paul urges us to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests . . . for all the Lord's people.” So pray in the morning for direction for the day, that each word and deed may be done for God's glory. Pray at noon for God's energy to continue filling you throughout the day. Pray in the evening, giving

thanks for the day and asking the Spirit for good rest and strength for the days ahead.

According to Ephesians 5, being filled with the Spirit prompts us to build one another up with spiritual songs. And we keep in mind all of God's blessings for us, for which we always give thanks. As God's people, the body of Christ, we also submit to one another for Jesus' sake.

So don't stop praying and singing. The Spirit works mightily through these actions. The Spirit even gives us a song and a prayer when we are down in the dumps.

Spirit of God, fill us with your presence and with songs and prayers for all occasions, that we may honor, praise, and give thanks to you. In Jesus, Amen.

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: LOVE

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

—Galatians 5:22-23

For the next several days we will focus on the fruit of the Spirit—and the first, foundational fruit mentioned here is love. The core teaching of the Bible is love. Love is at the center of God's character and all that God is and does. And when we come to believe in God—trusting in his amazing love for us through the life and work of Jesus and by the power of the Spirit—we begin to live by God's love, because God comes to live in us (see Romans 5:5; 1 John 4:16).

The parable in our reading for today is often called "The Lost Son" or "The Prodigal Son," but a more fitting title is "The Loving Father." The father in this story shows his love by not attempting to control his son's behavior, even though it surely broke his heart. Love always sets free.

Love moves in the direction of people. When the son re-

turns, the father does not hold back but runs to greet his son. Love is affectionate. The father throws his arms around his son and kisses him. Saying "I love you" always involves more than words. Love does not allow apathy and indifference to choke out warmth and affection.

Love is reconciling. The father's relationship with his son is more important than anything his son has done. Love does not allow the weed of strife to choke out a relationship. The father even calls for a celebration. Are you celebrating your loved ones today?

Thank you, Father, for pouring your love into our hearts through the Spirit. Help us to share it with others in all that we do. In Jesus, Amen.

THE JOURNEY OF JOY

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

—Philippians 4:4

A group of Buddhist scholars considered the weighty question of whether the Buddha, their figure of supreme serenity and harmony, ever laughed. After carefully checking their holy books, they concluded that indeed the Buddha may have smiled on at least one occasion. Some religions lack an emphasis on joy, but there should be no doubt that Christians appreciate humor, laughter, and joy. Why? Because God himself is joyful.

In Nehemiah 8:10 we are reminded, “The joy of the LORD is your strength.” And I love the description of God in Zephaniah 3:17: “The LORD . . . will take great delight in you . . . [and] will rejoice over you with singing.” Can you picture God singing for joy as he thinks about you and me?

Certainly the culmination of joy is the coming of Jesus. At Jesus’ birth the angel of the

Lord proclaims, “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10). Christ’s coming to bring salvation has brought exuberant joy into the world.

The Holy Spirit, who lives in us, makes the joy of God and Jesus our own. There is no longer any need to search for joy. The Christian can say, “I have found it!”

The apostle Paul explains that when we have the joy of the Lord, we have the peace of God as well—and that is the fruit we will look at tomorrow.

Lord, we live in a world that is missing deep joy because of disease, disaster, and emotional distress. We desperately need your joy. Holy Spirit, fill us with the joy of the Lord, we pray. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

THE PRACTICE OF PEACE

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.
—Ephesians 4:3

The 20th century could be described as a desperate search for peace. World War I was called “the war to end all wars,” but soon a second, bigger World War followed. In the 1960s flower children stuffed carnations into soldiers’ gun barrels while protesting “peace, peace.” In the 1970s youths gave up their militancy and sought peace in inner feelings. In the 1980s and ‘90s the cry was “peace through prosperity.” Yuppies chased after peace by accumulating wealth and pursuing upward mobility. But now in the 21st century most people simply do not know where to look to find the peace they crave.

Only when the Holy Spirit comes into our lives will we discover true peace. The biblical term for peace is *shalom*, a greeting still used in the Middle East today. *Shalom* refers to a

blessing that includes peace with God, personal happiness and flourishing, reconciled relationships, and harmony in society. And Jesus has made all this possible through his life, death, and resurrection for our sake.

The peace of the Spirit also opens our eyes to injustice and urges us to work against racism, police brutality, and the ravages of COVID-19. Just as fallen humans wage war with all of their ability and tenacity, Christians wage peace with similar vigor and strategy. When we live in the Spirit, we maintain our unity in Christ through the bond of peace that he bought for us.

Spirit of God, thank you for giving us your peace. Make us peacemakers in your world today for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

THE PROCESS OF PATIENCE

Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

—James 5:8

One afternoon a boy planted a package of seeds to start a garden. The next day he returned to look for the new plants, but they hadn't sprouted yet. So he dug them up to understand what had happened.

We are a lot like that. We expect immediate results. Maybe you have heard the American prayer for patience: "Lord, give me patience—and I want it now!" But only when the fruit of patience is allowed to mature slowly will we ever taste its sweetness.

In *The Way of Christian Living*, a book on the fruit of the Spirit, John Timmerman relates his discovery of the essence of patience. He grew up in a house with a drafty bedroom, and his parents would close that room in the winter and use it only to store Christmas presents. John would sneak into that room and delicately shake each package to guess

the contents. But whenever he went into that room, his mom and dad would notice the rush of cold air in the house, and they would catch him in the act. The presents had to wait until Christmas morning. John learned to wait even though he didn't feel like it.

Patience involves waiting with anticipation. Just as the farmer waits for the rains to help grow his crops, so we wait with expectation for God's promises to be fulfilled. Patience involves awaiting God's time without doubting God's love. This means waiting without worrying, complaining, or demanding that God should satisfy our time table.

Lord, waiting patiently is hard for us. Spirit, please give us the patience we need for a life of fruitfulness in Jesus. Amen.

KINDNESS

"Which of these . . . was a neighbor to the man . . . ?"

"The one who had mercy on him."

—Luke 10:36-37

My professor in the Netherlands was the kindest person I've ever met. Even though he had a position of great respect and even fame, he picked my family up at the airport when we arrived, transported our baggage fifty miles out of his way, and would faithfully open the door for me as well as the rest of his students.

Kindness meets the needs of people in concrete ways. A kind driver stops along the roadside to help someone change a flat tire. A kind neighbor will reach out to babysit when the family across the street has to rush one of their children to the emergency room. A kind motorist or pedestrian will help to give you directions in an unfamiliar town. Kindness is the merciful action of a loving heart.

But some people refuse to reach out and show kindness.

In Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan, a priest saw the man lying beaten along the road and passed by on the other side. A Levite did the same thing. But a Samaritan who came along helped the beaten man even though he was despised as an enemy. He acted as a neighbor because he showed mercy to the man in need. He was kind.

I believe that kindness is the world's greatest unused capital. A veritable gold mine of kindness lies buried within us, just waiting to be let out when we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Lord, may we overflow with kindness in the Holy Spirit even in times of trouble, hardship, and distress—and when we just don't feel like being kind. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

THE GRACE OF GOODNESS

She was always doing good and helping the poor.

—Acts 9:36

The fruit of goodness arises from the amazing grace of God. It seeks to help and to right wrongs where it can, providing benefits to others and leading them to give thanks and praise to God (Matthew 5:16).

As we have read in our text for today, Tabitha (Dorcas) “was always doing good and helping the poor.” And when she suddenly became sick and died, the apostle Peter asked God to bring her back to life. And God did that! Tabitha could then continue with her acts of goodness, and because of this miracle “many people believed in the Lord.”

Barnabas, who gave generously to the church and helped Paul (Saul) when he needed a friend, “was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (Acts 11:24; see also Acts 4:36-37; 9:27-28).

Cornelius, one of the first Gentiles (non-Jews) to believe in Jesus, was already “devout and God-fearing,” and “he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly” (Acts 10:2). God sent him a vision, telling him to invite Peter to his house. God also sent Peter a vision, telling him to go and visit Cornelius. So Peter did that, and he shared the good news of Jesus with Cornelius and with a crowd of people who had gathered at his house. And all the people there received the gift of the Holy Spirit that day and were baptized (Acts 10)!

Lord Jesus, thank you for the good people in this world. Holy Spirit, breathe your goodness into all your people so that others may see and give praise to the Father in heaven. Amen.

FAITHFULNESS

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. . . . —Hebrews 11:13

Chuck Swindoll, a pastor, author, and teacher, has said that many of the most important questions in life have one answer. What characterizes people who tend to be successful in sports, sales, or any skilled job? What quality in business builds respect deeper than any other? What brings security in relationships? What makes us choose one brand name over others? The answer to all of these questions is consistency, or faithfulness.

Faithfulness is a valuable commodity in every walk of life: in the family, business, friendship, and the church. Yet, tragically, faithfulness is something we are not always good at. We make resolutions and soon give up on them. We fail to follow through even if we are determined to make a change. It's hard to be faithful on our own.

We need the help of the Spirit of God, who is always faithful.

In Hebrews 11 we find many examples of people who had faith in God and who faithfully believed in God's promises. Their lives were examples of faithfulness. They knew that they depended on God for everything, and they saw that God faithfully provided for them—even if some of God's promises were not fulfilled by the time they died.

If you are a person of faith, God calls you to be a person of faithfulness. That is life in the Spirit. The Lord, who is faithful, promises to give us all the faithfulness we need.

Almighty and faithful God, enable us by your Spirit to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. In his name, Amen.

GENTLENESS

Remind the people . . . to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.
—Titus 3:2

Gentleness is probably the least-talked-about fruit of the Spirit. And even though it is often overlooked, it is one of the most important character traits of people who live by the Spirit. In the Bible, gentleness is also called meekness, and it is a prominent virtue in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus teaches us, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

Our world today does not value gentleness. Instead we are loud, boisterous, rowdy, showy, obnoxious, and pushy. One commentator described our culture in North America as "restless, rootless, and ruthless." Gentleness is the opposite of these. Gentle folks are not restless but calm and composed, not rootless but stable, not ruthless but respectful. Biblical synonyms for the word *gentle* include *humble, meek, considerate, courteous, respectful, and noble*.

We tend to categorize gentle people as wimps. But gentleness is actually the result of bringing great strength under control. In a biblical sense, the strongest people are those who dare to be gentle. And the best example to guide us is Jesus.

Jesus calls out, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). To be gentle or meek is to be God-molded, Christ-shaped, and Holy Spirit-directed. Ask the Spirit for an extra measure of gentleness today.

Forgive us, Lord, for associating gentleness with weakness. May we as Christians take the lead in being gentle toward everyone. Amen.

SELF-CONTROL

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace . . . and self-control. . . .
Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*

—Galatians 5:22-25

As we wrap up our reflections on the fruit of the Spirit today, we focus on self-control. In the apostle Paul's discussion here, we can see that self-control is very important for helping us turn away from "the desires of the flesh."

But we may wonder, How can we actually practice self-control? How can we turn away from all the sins and "actions of the flesh" that are listed here? Are we strong enough to control our sinful desires on our own? No. We need the power of God the Holy Spirit to guide us.

The self-control that Paul is talking about is not accomplished by the power of our old, sinful self. It can only be accomplished in the power of the new self that we receive through the finished work of Jesus Christ—that is, the new

life that comes to us by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

With the new life of the Spirit in us, we have a new self that is led by the Spirit. And because we are led by the Spirit, we can "keep in step with the Spirit." Like a tree or a vine with the life of the Spirit in us, we can bear "the fruit of the Spirit" such as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

This is the Spirit's work in us, and we need to surrender our old, selfish, sinful nature each day so that we can live by the control of the Holy Spirit.

Guide us, Lord, to crucify the old, sinful nature "with its passions and desires" so that we will enjoy life in the Spirit. Amen.

GIFTS OF KNOWING

To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge. . . . —1 Corinthians 12:8

In the distribution of spiritual gifts, the Spirit of God pours out knowledge and gives wisdom and discernment for the use of that knowledge.

For example, the Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon “that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah” (Luke 2:26). And when Jesus was born and his parents, Mary and Joseph, brought him to the temple, Simeon saw the Christ child with his own eyes. Then Simeon used words of wisdom to say a blessing and to prophesy about Mary’s future (Luke 2:28-35).

Paul received a gift of discernment of spirits when he was on his first missionary journey. The Holy Spirit sometimes works in powerful and miraculous ways when the gospel, the good news of Jesus, is being introduced in a new area. That’s because those areas tend to be influenced by evil powers

that want to resist the spread of God’s Word. On Cyprus Paul met a man named Elymas who was a sorcerer and a false prophet. Rebuking Elymas, Paul said, “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! . . . Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?” (Acts 13:10). Then Paul said Elymas would be blinded for a time, and immediately Elymas couldn’t see. All of this took place in front of a military commander who had wanted to hear the Word of God—and “when he saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed about the teaching of the Lord” (Acts 13:12).

Spirit of God, we ask for knowledge, wisdom, and discernment so that we can represent you wisely. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

GIFTS OF SPEAKING

If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith.
—Romans 12:6

The gift of prophecy involves speaking God's Word in a specific situation. Although prophecy is sometimes about a future event, it is *usually* a preached word or teaching that God wants his people to hear and apply to their lives in the present.

For example, the prophet Moses received the law of God for his people so that the people could learn it and teach it to their children for daily living (see Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

Isaiah received some prophecies that were fulfilled many years later, but God also told Isaiah to urge the people, "Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed" (Isaiah 1:16-17). These words still apply to us today also.

The apostle Paul also mentions the gifts of tongues and of interpreting tongues. These

gifts are less common than prophecy, but sometimes the Spirit gives them to his people to bring the Word of God in a dramatic way. Paul explains that tongues are a sign that the Spirit uses to convince unbelievers of his power, and that prophecy is intended for believers (1 Corinthians 14:22). Paul discusses these gifts in detail in 1 Corinthians 14, and he advises that if someone is going to speak in tongues in a worship gathering, a person who can interpret should also be there, so that everyone may be blessed by what is said.

The Spirit can call on us to speak his Word. When he does that, we must speak faithfully so that others can glorify God.

Spirit, guide us to speak so that people can hear your truth and grow to know your love. Amen.

GIFTS OF SKILL, TEACHING, AND MORE

The LORD . . . has filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills . . . to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts. —Exodus 35:30-33

The Holy Spirit supplies natural talents, the learning of skills, and many kinds of spiritual gifts for the benefit of all.

At the time of Moses, the Lord filled Bezalel with the Spirit, wisdom, knowledge, and many skills to work with metal, stone, and wood in all kinds of artistic crafts. God also filled Bezalel and others with the ability to teach so that many more could become skilled workers and designers. All of these gifts can be used to give glory to God.

God also gifts some people to be administrators, in order to guide and lead others in the church and in the surrounding community, to build ministries and structures and systems that can benefit everyone. All of these things can be developed and used to bring glory to God.

To some people the Lord also gives gifts of healing and mira-

cles. And more often he gives gifts of learning and discovery so that people can learn how to make medicine and discover cures for diseases. The benefits of medical science and technology have been able to help billions of people around the world, and for all of these good things we can give glory to God.

In addition, God gives gifts of encouragement and mercy for serving others in many ways (see Romans 12:6-8). In the church and in society, mentors, counselors, and service workers of all kinds provide help and meet the needs of other people in countless ways. To God be the glory!

Lord, you have given all of us gifts. May we use them to honor you and to bless others. Amen.

GRIEVING AND QUENCHING THE SPIRIT

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit. . . . Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.
—Ephesians 4:30-32

The Bible includes warnings about grieving the Spirit and hindering his work.

Ananias and Sapphira lied to the church and the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-10). They sold a piece of property, kept some of the money, and gave the rest to the church. That wasn't a bad thing, of course, but then they lied about their gift, saying they donated all of the money from the sale. They wanted people to be impressed by their generosity. But they could not get away with their deception. If we make a false commitment to God, pretending we are following the Spirit and even bragging about it, we fall into dangerous hypocrisy.

Following our own selfish desires, we can quench or suppress the Spirit. We can dampen the Spirit's fire by not following the Spirit's leading. We can refuse to use the gifts of

the Spirit when they are available. But if we do things like that, how can we expect to be faithful and useful to God?

We can also grieve the Spirit by rebelling against God and doing as we please (see Isaiah 63:10). We can be stubborn and mean-spirited. Instead of being kind and compassionate, we can act with bitterness and anger. We can be unwholesome and immoral.

How can we protect ourselves from these destructive ways? We can ask the Holy Spirit to fill us and guide us each day so that we can live in step with him. Then God can use us in wonderful ways.

Protect us, Lord, from grieving and quenching your Spirit. Fill us and direct us to follow your will, not our own. Amen.

THE OVERCOMING SPIRIT

They tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. . . . Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia . . . begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

—Acts 16:7-9

The book of Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit spreading the good news of Jesus out into the world. The Spirit fills believers in Christ and empowers them to be his witnesses. We like to be comfortable, and we often stay cloistered in our own communities. But the Spirit keeps pushing the church to take risks and spread the gospel to every corner of the world.

The Spirit moved the first Christians out from Jerusalem to Samaria and other nations nearby (Acts 8-10). Then the Spirit appointed missionaries to go to other lands (Acts 13). Our reading today shows that the Spirit wanted to spread the gospel into Europe (Macedonia, Greece, and beyond). So he blocked the missionaries from going another way.

Do you feel the push of the Holy Spirit? Go beyond your

comfort zone and get to know someone who doesn't know Jesus. Keep listening to the Spirit, even if it means changing your plans.

The Holy Spirit overcomes all kinds of problems as well. The Spirit enabled the church to deal with racism (6:1-7), persecution (8:1-9:31), conflict with government (12:1-24), differences among leadership (15:1-16:5), powers of evil (19:13-20), and unbelief (28:23-28). After facing each of these problems, the church grew (Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:28). Likewise, the Spirit can overcome any fears, anxieties, and hesitations that we may have about sharing the good news.

Spirit, give me the courage to share your love with the people you want me to meet today. Amen.



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