

# Introduction



In the fall of 2007, my Colorado Rockies baseball team was on an incredible winning streak, leading to the National League playoffs and eventually the World Series (which we won't talk about). I convinced my wife that our old 27-inch TV wouldn't do, explaining how we couldn't even see the scores from our couch, unless we used binoculars. I laid it on thick. It worked.

Within hours I brought home a 50-inch, plasma HDTV. I couldn't wait to watch baseball and football on this beauty, so I immediately connected all the cables, sound system, and DVD player. When I finished, I eagerly turned on the set to watch a baseball game ... and was totally disappointed. The picture quality looked as lousy as before, except now it was twice as obvious.

Panicking, I grabbed the remote and started exploring buttons. When I hit the INPUT button, I realized that my input was still set on TV rather than HDMI. One click later, I was singing the "Hallelujah Chorus." I could now see the mustard smear on the face of the guy in the stands eating a hot dog. Incredible!

I possessed all the right equipment. I had correctly connected the HD cable. But I wasn't *experiencing* HD ...

until I discovered the INPUT button. That button enabled me to experience the fullness of what was already mine.

### **Holy Spirit in HD?**

For many Christians, our experience with the Holy Spirit resembles my television incident. We have the right “equipment.” We know the Bible verses. We believe in the ministry of the Spirit ... but the “picture quality” of our lives doesn’t really reflect the Spirit’s activity. We long for more – more of His power, more of His love, more of His healing in our normal, everyday lives. And yet we don’t know how to get there. So we end up settling for a “little bit” of the Spirit, rather than the “more” our heart yearns for.

If that describes you, I’m so glad you picked up this book. In it, you will discover a practical and biblical pathway into the exhilaration of an everyday relationship with the Spirit in which you can more deeply experience His love, hear His voice, see His power, and live in His fullness.

As an evangelical pastor, I have seen many abuses and excesses regarding the ministry of the Holy Spirit, but I have also personally experienced and observed in others the joys of a growing relationship with the Spirit. I felt compelled to write this book because of the number of Christians and Christian leaders who long to experience the Spirit more deeply but feel afraid or uncertain about going there. This book will reveal how *you* can experience more of the Spirit ... without being weird.

I’m not interested in theory. You can find other books offering that. I want to provide biblical and practical steps to help you experience the Spirit in real ways. Here’s where we’re headed:

- In Section One, you will discover how you can experience the Spirit *personally*, cultivating an intimate relationship with Him.
- In Section Two, you will learn from the examples and teaching of Scripture how to listen to and recognize the Spirit's voice, as well as how this can enhance your ministry to others.
- In Section Three, you will discover how the Spirit can energize your prayer life, including practical insights into the ministry of healing prayer.
- In Section Four, you will learn how you can be filled with the Spirit's power in ordinary and extraordinary ways.

Throughout the book you will find several "Holy Spirit Laboratory" exercises, providing opportunities to stop and practice what you are reading. To read *about* the Spirit without *experiencing* Him would be to miss the point. So don't hurry through this book. Allow the Spirit to meet you in these pages.

Also, feel free to study this book with a group of friends. (A study guide can be found in the Additional Resource section at the end of the book.) What better way to learn about the Spirit than to do so in community?

Are you ready to experience more of the Holy Spirit? Let's dive in!



# Section One

## Experiencing the Spirit Personally





## Chapter One

# You CAN Experience the Spirit



**W**hen I was a kid, my family had a very normal, unimpressive mutt named Caramel. She was overweight, moved slowly, and had dishwasher-colored hair. Like I said ... fairly unimpressive to the outside world.

But there was something about Caramel I'll never forget. When taking a car ride, she loved having the window all the way down and leaning out to experience the refreshing breeze. Her face held a look of sheer joy as the wind rushed past. She chose the exhilaration of the wind to the quiet, interior comfort of our vehicle.

That image offers a picture of the invitation God extends to us every day regarding the presence of His Holy Spirit in our lives. Will we slightly open the window of our soul, allowing a "little bit" of the Spirit's activity in? Or will we choose to roll the window all the way down so that we can fully experience the Spirit's exhilarating breeze? This book is for those who realize that a little bit of the Spirit is not enough. You long for a life in which you can experience more of God's love,

more of His peace and power, more of His presence in every circumstance.

Jesus longs for us to experience this as well. Check out His amazing promise to us in Luke 11:13. “How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” More of the Spirit. That’s the promise Jesus gives to us. Which raises an obvious question: *Why aren’t we experiencing the “more” that Jesus promises?*

We can trot out the usual suspects—busyness, distractions, sin. But if we’re honest, we realize our struggle actually has a much deeper root. The joy, the peace, the power promised us in Scripture are all dependent upon our *experiencing* the Holy Spirit. And quite honestly, we’re not sure what to do with the Holy Spirit.

We know He’s important, given how frequently He’s mentioned in the Bible. We know He’s an essential part of the Trinity. All that is settled in our minds. What we struggle to understand is how we *experience* Him. What does it look like to lean out the window and experience the Spirit more fully?

### **Is Experiencing the Holy Spirit a Little Scary to You?**

I realize this kind of language may be making some of you nervous. I get that. Attending church as a kid, I heard about the “Holy Ghost” and immediately concluded, *I don’t want THAT to get near me.* I wasn’t interested in hanging out with a ghost, even if it was holy. For many Christians, our image of the Holy Spirit is this impersonal (and at times scary) “force” that we prefer leave us alone.

In college, I found myself engaged in fairly intense conversations with believers who referred to themselves as “Spirit-filled.” These friends insisted I wasn’t filled with the Spirit because I didn’t speak in tongues.

What a challenging and painful season for me. I deeply respected these guys, but I couldn't help feeling that the Christian world was now divided into two camps—the "haves" and the "have nots." And I was a have not.

For some of us, our hesitance in wading into the reality of experiencing the Spirit hearkens back to similar conversations, where a sincere friend tried to project *their* experience of the Spirit onto us, and in doing so made that particular experience a mark of authentic spirituality. Since we don't do *that*—whatever *that* is—we feel like second-class Christians, forever destined to sit on the bench.

Once, at a worship conference, I walked forward to receive prayer. The person praying for me so wanted me to be "slain in the Spirit" that he kept trying to push me over. In that moment, I discovered a new way to apply the apostle Paul's encouragement in Ephesians 6 to "stand firm."

Most of us probably have similar stories where certain "manifestations" of the Spirit were forced upon us or on someone we know, leaving a distinctively bad taste in our mouths. The problem, however, is that we often throw the baby out with the bathwater. Consciously or subconsciously we conclude, *If THAT is what it means to experience the Spirit, I'm not interested.* We end up settling into a Christianity in which we talk about the Spirit and memorize verses about the Spirit and believe truths about the Spirit, but we rarely if ever actually *experience* Him.

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This describes my Christian life for a number of years. I knew the Bible. I memorized Scripture. I was

active in ministry. I fasted and prayed regularly. But below the surface lay a weariness, an emptiness, a dissatisfaction. Even with the discouraging conversations I experienced with my friends in college, my heart felt a longing to know the Holy Spirit better. Over time, that began to happen in a variety of ways, which resulted in a passion to help other Christ-followers experience the Spirit more deeply.

### **It's Time to Peel off Our Labels**

Part of the challenge in writing a book like this and in openly sharing my own personal experience is that many of us operate in fairly neat and tidy theological categories regarding the work of the Spirit. We tend

*The Spirit does not fit well into our narrowly defined theological boxes.*

to label people who have different experiences than we've had or who use certain words differently than we do or who attend a church with a different perspective on the

Spirit. Once we determine what camp they are in, we quickly dismiss them—and unfortunately miss an opportunity to grow in our relationship with the Spirit. The Spirit does not fit well into our narrowly defined theological boxes, often working in ways outside our own experience or personal comfort. We too easily dismiss these experiences simply because they don't fit our categories.

I once listened to a podcast of a Bible teacher discussing the authority of Scripture. When asked about the possibility of people coming to know Jesus through dreams and visions rather than a direct interaction with the Bible, he mockingly rejected the idea, asserting that, "These alleged supernatural experiences are outside of what the Bible teaches."

As I listened, I thought of my conversation not long before with a man in the Middle East who described how he became a Christian: Jesus appeared to him in a vision and called this man to follow Him. He did. He now actively ministers for Jesus among a people very much opposed to Christianity. His story is not unique. I have visited with a number of missionaries in that region who describe how common this phenomenon is.

How easily we can dismiss certain stories that don't fit our theological categories or our experience. Ironically, the Bible offers numerous examples of God speaking to people through dreams and visions. In fact, on the day of Pentecost, Peter stood up and declared this to be one of the marks of the age of the Spirit: "Your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams" (Acts 2:17).

We need to be careful, lest we find ourselves on the side of the Pharisees who saw Jesus perform miracles but rejected them because they didn't fit into their theological framework (see Luke 6:6–11 as one of many examples of this.) If we truly want to grow in our experience of the Spirit, our hearts need to be open to having our theological boxes expanded—not beyond the principles given in Scripture but certainly beyond our experience. My own Holy Spirit boxes have been expanded numerous times over the years, which makes me hesitant to use labels to categorize the Spirit's activity.

I struggle to find labels that describe my own experience with the Spirit. I don't know what category I fit into. I am a seminary-trained, senior pastor of an evangelical church. I am absolutely committed to the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to our mission to reach the world. I also frequently pray for the sick. I teach people how to hear God's voice. I sometimes see pictures when I pray

for people and will share with them what I sense God saying. I have a personal prayer language that I at times use in my prayer times with God. My life and ministry have been profoundly impacted by two pastors: Tim Keller, a gospel-centered Presbyterian, and the late John Wimber, who founded the Vineyard movement and whose ministry was marked by dramatic manifestations of the Spirit.

For some, this description may cause you to stop reading this book. However, I hope that for many my journey with the Holy Spirit might stir in you a longing to experience Him more fully in your life. I'm not interested in getting anyone to switch camps. I'm not even sure what camp I'm in. I do know that the Holy Spirit has become more real to me over the years and that He wants to do that for you as well.

### **You Can Enjoy a Relationship with the Spirit**

Recently we interviewed a young man for a church staff position. After he effectively answered several ministry-related questions, I decided to throw him what I perceived to be a softball question.

"Tell me about your relationship with the Holy Spirit?" Given that his denomination has historically been open to the work of the Spirit, I assumed this question would be a no brainer.

Silence. "Uh ... well ... He's really important, you know. Um, He ... well, He helps me be a better Christian, I guess ... Is that what you are asking?"

I followed up to clarify but quickly realized this question was no softball question at all. It was a question he struggled to answer. He's not alone. I find that very few Christians feel comfortable talking about their relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Not so for the apostle Paul. For Paul, the Holy Spirit was not a convenient afterthought or a minor theological concept but rather a vital part of his everyday experience. Paul talked about the Holy Spirit the way we talk about a personal friend.

For instance, in a letter to the church at Philippi—a letter Paul wrote from prison—Paul said, “Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance” (Philippians 1:18–19, NIV84). In the midst of dire circumstances, Paul acknowledged the personal help he received from the Spirit.

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Or how about Romans 8:26, where Paul declared, “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.”

Help in weakness. This depicts what a close personal friend would do—offer tangible help in a time of need. Paul felt very comfortable talking about his personal relationship with the Spirit. Clearly this relationship was vital to his Christian experience and to ours as well.

### **Getting Up Close and Personal**

In the New Testament, when someone wanted to describe a significant level of participation or personal engagement, they frequently used a particular Greek word, *koinonia*, which is often translated “fellowship” or “participation” (see Acts 2:42 and Philippians 3:10). In today’s terminology, the word *koinonia* describes the difference between watching from the sidelines or playing in the game. Huge difference.

One of my sons is learning to drive. For the first 15 years of his life, he rode in the backseat of a car, oblivious to stop lights, lane changes, and street names. Now that he sits in the driver's seat, he suddenly has a new appreciation for the complexity of automobile transportation. That's *koinonia*—not simply a distant awareness but a personal experience.

In light of this definition, it is fascinating that Paul twice chose this word to describe our relationship with the Holy Spirit. In 2 Corinthians 13:14, Paul declared, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Paul was describing our personal engagement with the Spirit of God.

Similarly, in Philippians 2:1-2, Paul wrote, "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship (*koinonia*) with the Spirit ... then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose." (NIV84)

***Experiencing the Spirit is normal Christianity.***

Paul realized that unity in relationships depends on every believer experiencing *koinonia* with the Spirit of God—a very real, personal,

engaging relationship with the Spirit. For Paul, *experiencing the Spirit is normal Christianity*. This is not for a few select, super spiritual saints. Every believer has this privilege.

**Does Jesus Agree?**

So how does all of this strike you? Does this stir within you a longing for a deepening experience with the Spirit? If so, great! Keep reading. However, I'm guessing that for others, this kind of talk still makes you

a bit uncomfortable. Isn't there a danger that we might be emphasizing the Spirit too much? I'm certainly not arguing for de-emphasizing the Father and the Son, while elevating the work of the Spirit. I am, however, passionate that our relationship with the Spirit aligns with the picture given in the New Testament—where the ministry of the Spirit is essential in experiencing the fullness of the Father and the Son.

In John 14–16, as Jesus explains the reality of His departure, He encourages the disciples to not let their hearts be troubled and to trust Him when circumstances seem dark and difficult. But He actually offers them more than an exhortation to deeper faith. Read the following verses carefully:

“If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” (John 14:15–18, NIV84)

Did you notice what He offers them? He promises to give them “another Counselor.” This word translated “Counselor” refers to an advocate, one who comes alongside to assist, to help, to encourage. What’s fascinating is that Jesus describes the Spirit as “another” Counselor. This Greek word specifically refers to another of the same kind. In other words, the Spirit that Jesus promises will have a similar ministry as He had among them—with one crucial distinction: “But you know him, for he lives with you *and will be in you*” (John 14:17, my emphasis).

Whereas Jesus' ministry to them had been external—a relationship among people—now the Spirit's ministry to them will be internal; the Spirit of God living in them. Jesus promises them an even deeper experience after He leaves. In fact, notice how Jesus describes this Spirit. "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18). He doesn't say "I will not leave you as orphans; My Spirit will come to you." No. He says, "I will come to you."

From Jesus' perspective, the Spirit that would come to live in His followers was Jesus' very own presence! That's why Luke and Paul both speak of the "Spirit of Jesus" or the "Spirit of Jesus Christ" (see Acts 16:7 and Philippians 1:19). The Holy Spirit is the very presence of Jesus in us. You can't get more personal than that.

Recently my dad, my son, and I were heading back home after doing some shopping about an hour away. Unfamiliar with the area, I soon found myself disoriented and uncertain as to the direction to go. Okay ... we were lost.

*The Holy Spirit is the very presence of Jesus in us.*

At that point the three of us males decided to do something highly unusual for our gender: we asked for directions. Pulling into a car dealership, we found a very helpful young man who knew exactly how to get us home.

"Take a right out of the parking lot," he told us. "Then go left at the railroad tracks. At the next light, take a right and stay on that road and it will get you exactly where you need to go."

It sounded simple enough, but I took notes just in case. We drove out of the dealership ... and within three minutes were completely lost again. The path home

wasn't quite as simple as he described. At that moment, I realized what we really needed – that young man in our car. We needed him sitting next to us, guiding us to our destination.

For many believers in Christ, we settle for directions in our relationship with God. We view the Bible as a guidebook, telling us how to live. But it doesn't take long to realize we need more than a list of guidelines to follow. We need the very Person of God living in us – His power, His presence with us. The Spirit enables this to happen.

### **The Presence of God Lives in You**

Not surprisingly, the entire story of the Bible centers around this idea of God's presence with His people. The tabernacle and then the temple were both physical localities in which God's presence dwelt. But in the New Testament, something absolutely glorious happened on the day of Pentecost. God gave His Spirit to every believer in Jesus. Paul later declared this to be the essence of the gospel: "Christ in you" (Colossians 1:27). The very presence of God lives in us. We are now the temple, the place in which God's Spirit dwells.

What an incredible truth! What an awesome reality – the actual presence of Jesus living in you through the Spirit. Not information. Not a map. Not a list of rules to follow. If you have placed your trust in Jesus, this is absolutely true of you. God's very own Spirit lives in you.

So how can we experience more of this Spirit in our lives? That's the question we will explore in the chapters ahead. But before you go there, I encourage you to stop reading and take a few minutes to reflect upon your relationship with the Holy Spirit.

### **HOLY SPIRIT LABORATORY**

On a piece of paper or in your journal, answer the following question:

How would you describe your relationship with the Holy Spirit?

After answering that question, slowly read Jesus' words in John 14:15-18:

"If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." (NIV84)

What do you long for your relationship with the Spirit to be like? Be specific.

Take a moment and ask the Father for more of the Holy Spirit in your life.

[If you are uncertain as to whether or not you even have a relationship with the Spirit, please turn to page 211, endnote 1]

## Chapter Two

# The Essential, Overlooked Ingredient to More of the Spirit



I hate to wait. Whether waiting in a doctor's office, waiting for a light to turn green, waiting for a website to download ... doesn't matter. I don't like waiting. In a matter of seconds, my blood pressure rises, my heart rate increases, and my level of impatience elevates.

Can you relate? How many of us have paid a few hundred dollars extra so that our new computer processor will run faster? Never mind that the actual speed increases a tenth of a nanosecond. We want fast and we want it now.

A *New York Times* article reported that Americans spend roughly 37 billion hours each year waiting in line. This same article identified the emotions we experience while waiting: "stress, boredom, that nagging sensation that one's life is slipping away."<sup>1</sup> Any idea why Disneyland intentionally designs its amusement park lines to wrap around buildings and form winding queues? To hide the length so we won't get as frustrated while waiting. None of us like to wait.

Why is waiting an experience we so desperately want to avoid? It's all about control. Waiting means someone else is in control of my life, my schedule, my time at that moment – and I don't like that. And neither do you. We like to run our lives. We like to manage every minute of our schedules. We like to be God.

In light of our aversion to waiting, I find it interesting and a bit unsettling that when Jesus instructed His followers how they could experience the life-giving power of the Spirit, He offered this initial command: Wait. "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about" (Acts 1:4).

Seriously? If I were one of the disciples, I would have been beside myself. "Are you kidding me? Why do we need to wait? The world needs to hear the gospel. Ministry needs to happen. What could possibly be the value in waiting?" Great question. What could be the value in waiting?

### **The Unintended Benefit of Waiting**

A friend of mine went to the hospital thinking he had the stomach flu, only to have the doctors discover two malignant tumors surrounding a section of his colon. They immediately performed surgery, removing the tumors, but then the waiting began. Three days awaiting the pathology results. Excruciating. It's one thing to wait at a stop light or in a doctor's office. It's another thing to wait for news upon which your life depends.

In those circumstances, our waiting highlights the fact that this situation is completely out of our control. We are totally dependent upon someone else to bring the information we need. It's a very humbling place to be. Now granted this is a fairly dramatic example of waiting, but it highlights a significant reason we hate to wait: We

don't like being dependent on anyone or anything else. Waiting makes us acutely aware of our need—which is exactly what makes it so spiritually powerful.

When Jesus urged His disciples to wait for the Spirit, notice the first thing He told them: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised” (Acts 1:4). In other words, don't leave home without the Spirit. This command highlights the fact that the disciples were not in control of their situation. *They* were not calling the shots; Jesus was. The waiting in Jerusalem speaks of their absolute dependence upon the Holy Spirit. Jesus wanted them to know they could not possibly accomplish the mission on their own. So the command to wait was fueled by an awareness of their need.

This awareness of our need becomes the fertile soil in which the Spirit of God moves most freely. He is not looking for the able, the competent, the perfect, the well-adjusted, the successful, the self-sufficient. Quite the opposite. The Spirit is looking for those who are aware of how much they need Him. Jesus makes this abundantly clear in John 7:37–39.

Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not yet been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

I love the imagery Jesus uses. He likens the Spirit to rivers of living water that will flow from within us. This image vividly describes the fullness God longs to bring to our lives—an experience that refreshes and empowers.

“Rivers” speak of the breadth of what God makes available to us. Not a little drinking fountain or even a stream. We’re talking rivers—the imagery communicates limitless amounts of fullness, power, and movement.

Sounds great, but notice the prerequisite Jesus gives for this experience: “Anyone who is thirsty.” That’s the key that opens the door for a real, life-giving experience with the Spirit. We must be thirsty. In other words, we must be aware of how desperately we need the Spirit of God.

Imagine you had no awareness of thirst in your body. Even though your physical body desperately needed fluid, you wouldn’t know it. You would eventually die of dehydration, not because of a lack of water supply around you. You would die because you weren’t aware of your need. That imagery offers a tragic picture of life without thirst, and even more tragically describes what often passes for Christian growth today.

We love hearing principles for spiritual growth—five steps to a better prayer life, three keys to sharing your faith, four ways to have a successful marriage. The implied message is “Just work at it. You can do this. Here are the steps. Go for it.” So we do just that. We make promises. We establish accountability. We commit to a new way of doing life. “I promise I will listen to my wife better. I commit to avoiding porn on the internet. I will make time for prayer with God.” All great promises to make. The problem is, they are all built upon an incredibly weak foundation—*our* ability, *our* sufficiency, *our* determination.

Now we of course give lip service to needing the Spirit of God to help us, but in reality, the responsibility for change rests on us. The end result is inevitable

failure. We can grit out anything for awhile, but eventually we settle back into the old, comfortable patterns of behavior. We don't lack sincerity or the desire to change. *Our problem is that we are not thirsty.*

We lack awareness of how desperately needy we are—that without experiencing the Spirit's power in these areas, we are toast. "Do not leave Jerusalem," Jesus said. In other words, don't attempt the Christian life without the very real presence of the Spirit empowering you. This life-changing power is promised to those who are thirsty.

What encourages me about Jesus' promise in John 7 is the *continual* nature of the experience. Jesus doesn't describe a onetime event. He is not only talking about initially receiving the presence of the Spirit at conversion. His language articulates a *continual* invitation to us. Anytime, anywhere we are thirsty, we can come to Him and drink more deeply of His Spirit.

### **How Thirsty Are You?**

So how do we cultivate a thirst for the Spirit? How do we foster a deepening dependence upon Him? Paul actually answers that very question for us in 2 Corinthians 12, but let me warn you. His answer is not the answer we want to hear. Instead, we prefer answers like *pray this prayer, read this book, go to this conference*. We want something specific we can do.

But notice how Paul answers this question for us:

In order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore

I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

How's that for a list: weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, difficulties. According to Paul, that's how he experienced a deepening dependence upon the Spirit. This raises an immediate problem for us: we don't really want anything on that list! We don't like to be weak. We don't like to experience hardship or difficulty. But Paul reminds us that all these things provide fertile ground in which we can grow in our experience of the Spirit. Paul actually had the gall to say he *boasted* in his weaknesses; he delighted in them. Why? Because when he was weak, he experienced Christ's presence and power more deeply.

The moment our fourth child was born, we knew something was terribly wrong. Joshua just lay there, listless and unresponsive. He didn't cry. His skin looked different than our other children at birth. The nurses immediately took him to a special unit for oxygen and further testing. That began a journey for our family that none of us would have asked for, and yet we regularly thank God for.

It has been a journey of profound weakness and difficulty. We have seen dozens of medical specialists, tried numerous diets and supplements, read countless books, prayed for healing thousands of times, cried lots of tears, asked God hundreds of questions, felt incredibly helpless and out of control ... all the while hoping for a dramatic healing in Josh. Now thirteen years old, Josh has significant cognitive, verbal, and physical

delays. These bring to our lives daily challenges as well as many questions about the future.

When my wife Raylene and I look at the past thirteen years through the lens of personal convenience or successfully finding answers, the view looks fairly bleak. But when we look through the lens of the Spirit, the entire view changes. Both of us can attest that the profound weakness we have felt in trying to help Joshua has resulted in a deepening friendship with the Spirit. We share an intimacy in prayer and a spiritual attentiveness to the Spirit's voice that didn't exist before Joshua. In our weakness and difficulty, we have experienced Christ's power resting upon us in a greater way than ever before.

Neither of us would have voluntarily chosen this path, but we are deeply grateful for the spiritual experiences and blessings that have been the direct result. "When I am weak, then I am strong." Paul's words completely alter our paradigm for spiritual growth. Our weaknesses, our failures, the places in our lives where we feel powerless, all provide fertile ground for a deepening experience of the Spirit.

Have you thought about your failures and weaknesses in that light? Typically, we see our weaknesses as a liability, something we need to get rid of. But what if we saw them through the lens of the Spirit? What if we saw our struggle with anger or porn or gossip or greed as a blessing in disguise—a God-given means of reminding us how much we need His Spirit?

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What if we viewed the challenges in our lives—a difficult marriage, a controlling boss, a wayward child, an ongoing addiction, a recurring anxiety—through a similar lens? Paul boasted in his difficulties and weakness, not because he enjoyed those things, but because they opened a door for him to experience the Spirit more deeply.

### **HOLY SPIRIT LABORATORY**

On a separate sheet of paper, create a list of your weaknesses and difficulties. How do you feel about that list? Discouraged? Overwhelmed? Hopeful?

Now view your list through Paul's lens offered in 2 Corinthians 12:10. For each item, read this passage out loud, filling in the blank with that item.

“That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in \_\_\_\_\_ ... for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

After each statement, spend a few moments asking the Spirit to rest upon you in the midst of your struggle in that area.

### **How To Intentionally Be Weak**

A few years ago, I journeyed to Uganda on a mission trip with a group from our church. One afternoon we were told that a handful of leaders wanted to meet us, so we drove to a church building in their village, expecting a small group in an informal setting. Upon arrival, we discovered that a hundred people had gathered, waiting hours for us to speak to them. While some pastors would love this kind of spontaneous speaking opportunity, I

do not. Being a fairly scripted guy, I like to have things well prepared. I experience recurring nightmares where I am late for a worship service and have forgotten my notes, only to wake up in a cold sweat.

So here I was, living my worst nightmare, and yet a profound sense of peace—almost excitement—descended upon me. I earnestly prayed under my breath for God’s Spirit to help me, and He did. I shared a Scripture passage He had brought to my mind moments before. The thoughts and words came to me without having “officially” prepared anything. I experienced the Spirit in a very tangible way—mainly because I was out of my comfort zone and desperately needed Him.

Unfortunately, I find that when I return from a trip like that, I all too easily drift back into my areas of comfort and security—well-planned and scripted speaking engagements. My perception of my need for the Spirit dramatically decreases.

I know I’m not alone in this experience. Years ago, a friend returned home after leading a mission team and described the adventure of getting up every day without having a specific agenda. They prayed in the morning for direction, then went out and connected with people, looking for God to open doors. The stories were amazing. He asked me a simple question: How do we continue in that Spirit-dependent attitude after we return to our everyday lives at home?

It’s a great question. Obviously the answer is not a geographical one—that we need to minister somewhere else to experience the Spirit. The issue is dependence. When we place ourselves in contexts out of our comfort zones and choose to minister to people, suddenly our hearts become fertile ground for the power of the Spirit.

Where are you stepping out from your comfort zone? When is the last time you intentionally placed

yourself in a situation that required resources beyond what you knew you had? *When I am weak, then I'm strong.* Whether our weaknesses are unintentional (via failures, challenges we didn't ask for, etc.) or intentional (volunteering to do something out of our comfort zone) the result is the same – we are significantly more aware of our need for God's Spirit. That's the context in which He does His best work.

### **The Beautiful Gift of Longing**

Often our weaknesses and desperation open a door for us to experience a significant gift from God: the gift of longing. We long for more of His Spirit, which moves us to seek Him more earnestly. Remember Jesus' invitation from John 7:37? "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink." Those words highlight a vital, relational principle we often overlook: The Spirit waits to be wanted. He does His best work in the hearts of those who long for more of Him.

The first stirrings of my longing for the Spirit occurred during seminary. While knee-deep in classes and papers and lectures and books, God began to stir in my heart a longing for more of Him. I wanted more than

*The Spirit waits  
to be wanted.*

book knowledge about God; I wanted to *experience* Him in a real way. Part of this desire resulted from observing a friend who had a very intimate, real relationship with the Holy Spirit. And I wanted that.

At the same time, a fellow student introduced me to the writings of John Wimber, who led the Vineyard Movement. As I read some of his books, my yearning for more of the Spirit increased. Wimber's theological perspective intrigued me. He rejected the traditional Pentecostal position that speaking in tongues was *the*

evidence of the Spirit's filling, and yet He experienced the Spirit in very real and profound ways. I wanted more.

I'll never forget hearing John Wimber share his testimony. In it, he described a season in his Christian life in which he saw the biblical evidence for the Spirit's activity and yet wasn't experiencing it personally. His response? Longing. He began to ask God for more of the Spirit. This was no casual asking. In spite of no immediate answers to his prayers, Wimber continued to ask God earnestly for more. Eventually, God answered that prayer in dramatic ways.

The Spirit waits to be wanted. Are we asking for more of Him?

### **Is It *Really* Okay to Ask for More of the Spirit?**

Now I realize that this kind of language makes some Christians uncomfortable. Over the years, I've heard people assert that it is wrong for us to ask for more of the Spirit. After all, they will say, "He lives in us. The issue is not us having more of Him but Him having more of us." I certainly agree that a critical part of discipleship involves giving the Spirit increasing control of us. However, when we categorically discourage anyone from asking for more of the Spirit, we ignore a significant theme in Scripture.

Look carefully at Jesus' words in Luke 11:9-13.

So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 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?

This passage about asking, seeking, and knocking is familiar to many of us. However, we often fail to realize exactly what Jesus encourages us to ask for. “How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” Jesus urges us to ask for the Spirit, not simply as our initial response to the gospel. His language describes a *continual* asking, seeking, and knocking. We are to earnestly and persistently ask God the Father to give us more of the Spirit.

Now some may argue that all this talk of asking, seeking, and knocking makes God seem like an insensitive ogre who delights in dangling a carrot in front of us. He just wants to hear us beg. But that is hardly the picture Jesus gives in Luke 11. He specifically uses the analogy of a father giving good gifts to His children to describe how God the Father views us.

As a father, I never tire of hearing my children ask me for good things. The fact that they are asking reveals something important about their heart. To long for and yet never ask reflects a father/child relationship rooted in distance and distrust. God, our loving Father, wants us to ask Him for more of the Spirit. The act of persistent asking reveals a heart truly longing for Him.

Years ago, one of our children expressed an interest in archery. We enrolled him in a Saturday-morning class. Soon, he approached us asking if he could purchase a very expensive archery bow. Rather than immediately saying yes, we chose to wait. Within weeks, he no longer wanted a bow, having lost all interest in archery.

A similar scenario played out years later when he wanted to buy a guitar. This time, however, the longer we waited, the greater his desire became. He kept on asking. Finally we agreed. His earnest and persistent asking revealed a true longing. No wonder Jesus urges us to ask for more of the Spirit. Our asking reveals the depth of our longing.

Other Scriptures also encourage this earnest asking. For instance, in Ephesians 1, Paul prayed for the believers in Ephesus. Look carefully at his prayer: “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better” (Ephesians 1:17). What a fascinating request to pray, especially for believers in whom the Spirit of God already lives. Paul earnestly and continually prays that they would experience *more* of this Spirit who lives in them. From Paul’s perspective, more of the Spirit is always available to us. Not only is it appropriate to ask for more; it is critically important to do so.

### **What Does This Longing Look Like?**

Over the years, my heart has been stirred by the stories of men and women who were dissatisfied with what they had experienced of the Spirit. They wanted more ... not for selfish gain but for a greater expansion of God’s kingdom.

D. L. Moody was one such man. In the late 1800s, he actively presented the claims of Christ to large crowds. One day, en route to

another speaking opportunity, an elderly man tapped Moody on the shoulder, pointed a boney finger at him and said, “Young man, when you speak again, honor the Holy Ghost.”

*More of the  
Spirit is always  
available to us.*

For the next few months, Moody admits that those words left him unsettled. They wouldn't go away, but instead ignited an awareness of his need. That encounter, along with the prayers of two dear women friends, stirred in Moody a desperate longing for more. In his own words:

“And there came a great hunger into my soul. I knew not what it was. I began to cry as never before. The hunger increased. I really felt that I did not want to live any longer if I could not have this power for service. I kept on crying all the time that God would fill me with His Holy Spirit ... Well, one day, in the city of New York—oh what a day!—I cannot describe it. I seldom refer to it; it is almost too sacred an experience to name. Paul had an experience of which he didn't speak for fourteen years. I can only say that God revealed Himself to me, and I had such an experience of His love that I had to ask Him to stay His hand. I went to preaching again. The sermons were not different; I did not present any new truths, and yet hundreds were converted. I would not now be placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you should give me all the world...”<sup>2</sup>

These stories of D. L. Moody, John Wimber, as well as the believers in the book of Acts remind us that more of the Spirit is always available to us. We never arrive in terms of our experience of the Spirit, as if His work in our lives is somehow capped or that we have all of Him.

### **HOLY SPIRIT LABORATORY**

Before you continue this chapter, take a few minutes and reflect upon Jesus' words in Luke 11:13: "How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Read them slowly and prayerfully four or five times. Let them stir in your heart a longing for a greater experience of the Spirit.

Now take a moment and ask your Heavenly Father for more of the Spirit. Build into your prayer life this specific prayer, continually asking, seeking, and knocking for God to give you more.

### **What If Nothing Happens?**

In light of this discussion about longing for more of the Spirit, let me add a few words of caution: Be careful to avoid measuring the "success" of your seeking based on the stories of others. The Spirit's ministry never operates according to formulas. His answer to your earnest prayer will most likely look very different than His answer to another person's similar prayer.

*This is not about getting results; it's about relationship.*

Also, don't be discouraged or disappointed if you don't see any immediate or dramatic results when you begin asking. This is not about getting results; it's about relationship. Something spiritually powerful happens *in* us as we ask, seek, and knock. Our desire and dependence upon the Spirit increase, both of which He longs to see happen in our lives. So don't despise the waiting. Don't let it discourage you. Instead let it increase your desire for God.

My own experience of the Spirit has very much been a journey involving seasons of waiting, of longing, of asking, of wondering ... along with periodic seasons of increased activity and the Spirit's evident work. Even though I wish there was a neat and tidy formula for how to "flip the Spirit switch," He never works that way.

In John 3:8, Jesus describes the Spirit as being like the wind. You don't know where He comes from or where He is going. You can't put Him in a box. But you can set your sail so that when He chooses to move, you are right there, open and available to whatever He wants to do in and through you. That sail is set in our hearts as we long for Him and earnestly ask for more of Him.

Recently I enjoyed the privilege of visiting Israel for the first time. It was a 50<sup>th</sup> birthday bucket list trip for me. On trips like that where you visit multiple sites each day, you can easily find yourself in tourist mode—getting this photo, seeing this site. Near the end of the trip, we stood on the southern steps to the Old City of Jerusalem, the very steps that Jesus walked on His way up to the temple.

Our guide explained that many believe this was the actual spot where Peter preached to the crowds in Acts 2, after the Spirit had been poured out so dramatically. Are you kidding? Here I was, standing on that very spot. Suddenly, my tourist desire to get a picture took a back seat to a deeper desire.

As the group prepared to leave, I quietly asked one of our tour guides (who is also a church planter in Israel) if he would pray for me that I might experience more of the Spirit's power in my life. A huge smile spread across his face as he eagerly agreed. He said, "In all my years of doing tours, no one has ever asked me to do this. I would love to."

So we stood there arm in arm — a church planter and a senior pastor — praying for each other to experience God’s Spirit more deeply. That moment was a highlight of my trip and a reminder to me that it’s okay to ask for more of the Spirit. More than okay, it’s something Jesus and Paul urge us to do. No matter how long we have walked with Christ, there is always more of the Spirit available to us.