

THE HOLY SPIRIT

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What if Jesus came to your house today for a visit, and you told him you wanted to grow. What would you expect him to do? Heal you? Teach you? Challenge you? Give you new talents? Think about it. I can come up with many things I would want him to do, and I can think of a number of things I might expect him to do, but in all of my thoughts one of the last things I would expect him to say is, "Oh, you want to grow? Well, if that is what you want, I will have to leave. See you later." And I would never expect him to walk away. Wouldn't this be a strange way for him to produce growth in us? I surely think so.

But this is exactly what Jesus did:

"I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. . . . But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes,

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he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you" (John 16:7, 13-15).

For reasons we do not fully understand, Jesus decided to go to heaven and work on us from there, and he sent the Holy Spirit to be with us and produce the growth and change we seek. And he said that this is better than his being here himself. Therefore all I can think is that it must be incredible to have the Holy Spirit in our lives.

So what are we to do with the Holy Spirit? There is certainly no shortage of answers in the Christian world about the life of the Spirit and all that it entails. But this is not a book about all the Holy Spirit does in the life of the believer or in the church or in the world at large. It is a book about growth and how it occurs, so we want to take a look at the ways the Holy Spirit is involved in that process.

THE INITIATOR AND THE COMPLETER

WHEN I (HENRY) FIRST began my path of growth, I wondered one day if God wanted to have anything to do with me anymore, or if I were someone he didn't want. I prayed, and God did not seem to answer me; my hurts and pains were not quickly going away. I thought God had left me.

In the midst of these thoughts I remember a pastor telling me, "If God were through with you, you would not be worried about it or wanting to have anything to do with him. The desire you feel for him and for growth can only come from him and his Spirit. If you are moving toward God, it's because he's moving toward you. Rest in this fact. If you want him, he is looking for you." Then he showed me a verse to prove his point: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). I found out there is no such thing as "wanting God" and not being able to have him. If we want him, he is looking for us.

God not only begins a process in us, wooing us to him, but also pushes our growth to completion. As Paul said, "He who began a good

work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus^o (Phil. 1:6). If we feel some desire toward completion, God has *not* given up on us. He is still working, wooing, revealing light, and working to make us whole. Knowing his Spirit is at work on you and in you is a very good place to begin working on any issue in life. So the first point of how the Holy Spirit operates in our lives is this: *The Spirit begins the process of growth by wooing us to Jesus, and he is working to finish the task.*

One of the first things you should teach people is that they can trust the growth process, no matter how they feel in the midst of it. It is not going to be only up to them to “make it.” The Holy Spirit is always going to be there, drawing them to God and to greater and greater growth. I was greatly comforted by this fact, and I have seen it bring great comfort to others, especially when things were not going smoothly.

Security

In chapter 4 we talked about the importance of knowing that God is for us and not against us. In any relationship, to grow and change we have to first know we are secure. Our relationship with God is no different. How can we know we belong to him? How can we be sure we are secure?

The Holy Spirit gives us this security. After bringing us to a relationship with God, he locks the door behind us. Just as Noah locked the door of the ark to save a remnant of life from the flood, the Holy Spirit locks the door of our saving “ship,” our relationship with Jesus. Listen to what happens: “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph. 1:13). “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30).

When we put our trust in Jesus, we enter the boat, so to speak, and the door is sealed behind us. Through the sealing work of the Holy Spirit, God himself protects us to be always his. This has wonderful implications for the growth process. We cannot work on the real issues of our lives if we are insecure in our relationship with God. Because of the work of the Holy Spirit sealing us in him, we can stop worrying

about whether or not this relationship is secure and we can get on with the path and the work of growth.

One way to help someone know that this has happened in her life is to ask her what she believes about Jesus. If she believes he is the Christ and she trusts him for forgiveness, then this is proof she has been sealed with the Holy Spirit. The Bible says we can only believe if we are born of the Spirit, if he is inside us. As John puts it: “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (1 John 4:2).

If someone believes in Jesus, she has the testimony of the Spirit in her heart and she belongs to God (1 John 5:10). So if anyone has doubts, these verses can be very reassuring. Growth must begin in a secure relationship, and that security comes from the work of the Holy Spirit. Growth must be undergirded by this foundation.

The Partnership

Beyond the security and assurance the Spirit provides, what does the work of the Spirit look like day to day? What does he do? How do we work with him? As Jesus said, one way to think about the Holy Spirit is as the “Counselor.” He is someone who comes alongside us and helps us. And the ways he helps are numerous. It is very helpful to know what those are, so that in the growth process, as we shall see, we can ask for them. Although it would take an entire book to talk about all the ways he helps us, here is a partial list of what we can expect to happen in the Christian life as we ask for and work with the Spirit:

- He will always be with us, no matter where we are or what we are doing. He never leaves us (Ps. 139:7).
- He will search our hearts and show us what it is we need to change (Ps. 7:9; Prov. 20:27; Rom. 8:27; 1 Cor. 2:10).
- He will give us the abilities to do things we need to do, even gifts for work, or wisdom, or words to say when we don’t know what to say (Ex. 31:3; Deut. 34:9; Judg. 14:6; 2 Sam. 23:2; Mark 13:11).
- He will lead us and guide us in life (1 Kings 18:12; 1 Chron. 28:12; Neh. 9:20; Ps. 143:10; John 16:13; Acts 13:4; 16:6).

- He will show us truth and teach us (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 John 2:27).
- He will counsel us and help us (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13).
- He will help us to live the life we need (Rom. 7:6; 8:2, 4–6, 9, 11, 13, 26).
- He will fill us and control us (Rom. 8:6; Eph. 5:18).
- He will correct us and convict us (Ps. 139:23–24; John 16:8; Rom. 9:1; 1 Cor. 4:4; Phil. 3:15).
- He will change us (2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 3:3; 5:16–25).
- He will give us gifts to help each other and put the Body of Christ together (1 Cor. 12:7–12).

This is a lot to expect, but God promises that all these things are available.

The problem becomes the “how.” *How* does he do it? How can we get him to do it?

A Mystery

I wish I had a formula to give you about how the Holy Spirit works. It feels as if I have read everything ever written by those who say they do, and I’ve tried most everything I’ve read about. All I can say is that in my experience, the formulas have failed me. The Holy Spirit cannot be controlled.

But when we think about it, this makes perfect sense and also fits with what the Bible says, for the Holy Spirit is a Person, not a thing. We cannot reduce all of the work of the Holy Spirit to a formula. What we can do is what the Bible tells us to do: Ask for him to be in our lives and to help us. God promises us that if we ask him for the Spirit, he will come:

“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; he who seeks finds; and to him 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!” (Luke 11:9–13).

Basically, if there is a formula to how the Spirit works in our lives, this is it. It is to seek him, ask for him, and then follow him. Most of the problems people have in understanding the Holy Spirit come when they are asking for a particular experience of him, or a particular gift (or they are not asking for him at all). If we could get rid of our preconceptions of how or what he is going to do, and ask him to come for the need we have, much of the confusion would go away.

The best way to think about the Holy Spirit and growth is to think about a moment-by-moment relationship of dependency on him. We depend on him to guide us, lead us, talk to us, reveal truth to us, empower us to do what we can’t do, give us gifts to be able to give to others what they need, and many other things. But all this happens in an “abiding” sort of way. We yield to him and follow. We open up our hearts and beings to be “filled” with him. We ask him to invade all that we are and to work in us. In a sense, we give ourselves to him as we live out the life of growth.

Therefore, in light of the growth processes we encounter, life in the Spirit means that we do not “do growth” without him. It also means that he does not do growth “without us.” The miracle of the Holy Spirit’s invasion of our lives is that he is at work within us to change us and to lead us and guide us, but there is still an “us.” Paul said, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

The old way of trying to “do it right” by ourselves is over (vv. 16, 19). Now we live a life of faith with him inside us. *But we are still the ones who have to live this life and be accountable for it.* As Paul said, the “life that I live in the body, I live by faith.” So, as I go through the process of growth, each step I take is a faith step, depending on the Spirit to live it out with me. I live this life as he lives in me. It is mystery. I live this life with him living in me.

PRACTICAL SPIRIT-FILLED LIVING

JUST BECAUSE SPIRIT-FILLED LIVING is a mystery doesn't mean we can't do it. Nothing is more practical in the growth process than to need help and empowerment in taking very difficult steps of growth. Take Julie, for example.

Julie had been struggling with eating for several months as her life had gotten more and more stressful. She had prayed about it and confessed her overeating again and again. She felt bad about herself and was getting discouraged. Then she read a piece on how the Holy Spirit could empower her to do what was difficult. So she decided to put that to the test.

Julie's two most difficult tasks were turning from food and bringing people into her struggle. She had been reading about how breaking patterns of behavior had to do with confessing to God and to others and also finding out the root causes driving the behavior. One night she found herself at home alone and wanting to eat ice cream that she knew she did not need. She had just finished a healthy dinner an hour or so before.

She remembered what her growth partners had told her. When you feel tempted, ask God to empower you through his Spirit to do two things: *to turn from what is destructive* and *to turn to what is good, the things he says to do*. So, in her craving she stopped and prayed. She asked the Holy Spirit to help her. She prayed for his strength. She sat there with him, and then she asked him to show her what she was feeling. When she did not eat, her feelings of loneliness and stress became clearer to her; then she asked him to help her open up to someone. The name of a friend came to mind. She called the friend, who helped her move past the struggle.

This was a whole new world for Julie. For the first time she didn't have to fight the battle alone. She learned to depend on the Spirit's strength to do what she needed to do, and she yielded to the answers he provided. Before that, she had been alone in fighting temptation and not depending on him and his strength. She also depended on him for help through the support he provided in her friend. *She was both dependent and active*. He helped, she yielded to his help, and she took steps to follow him by reaching out to the person he made available.

Just the other day I talked to Ted, who had for years been fighting sexual addiction with sheer willpower. He had hit bottom, and for the first time he decided to bring God and his Spirit into the battle. One night he and his wife had an argument, and he was tempted to act out his feelings of betrayal and powerlessness. He felt justified. But this time he asked for God's Spirit to help.

Unexpectedly Ted "bumped into" a friend he had not seen in years, but who knew about his problem. His friend asked how he was doing with his addiction, and he said, "Horrible!" He opened up to the friend, who then told him he was on his way to a sexual addiction group, and he took Ted with him. The Holy Spirit had provided the help he needed and a whole new support system for his problem. When I talked to Ted, he had been clean for a few months.

Let me give you a more personal example. I was once in a difficult business relationship with a particularly strong-willed businesswoman. Discussing even the smallest issues with her proved to be very taxing. Sometimes I dreaded visiting her company because I knew I was going to have to work on an issue with her and I knew I was not going to be understood or listened to.

One day we got into a particularly heated argument and were getting nowhere. The more we tried to work it out, the worse it got. I was losing my temper and finding myself having attitudes and feeling moods I had not had or felt since my pre-spiritual teenage years. I did not know what to do, so inside myself I asked God's Spirit to work in me and in the situation. I asked him to find an answer and a way out of the impasse. I prayed, "Please help me to see what to do. Please give me the words to say. Please show me how to fix this." The words I prayed were not as important as my feelings of absolute dependency on the Spirit.

What happened surprised me. It was not that this business associate finally heard me or that I found the right words to communicate to her to be understood. What happened is that I heard the Holy Spirit. He showed me that it was I who had to listen to her and accept what she was saying to me. I had to hear her and understand her position. I also had to see where I had been wrong in the situation and apologize. His answer was as clear as a bell.

So I asked the Spirit to help me do that. I asked him to help me find the right words. I don't remember exactly how it happened, but we got past the problem. The Spirit showed me other ways I had been wrong. When I acknowledged them, everything changed, and we worked it all out. She did not change, and I don't know if she will ever see her side of the conflict, but the Spirit made it clear to me that the answer I needed did not involve her doing anything, but involved my confessing and repenting. I needed his help both to show me what to do and to help me carry it out. It reminded me of Jesus' words: "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). God's Spirit has promised to always be there to lead us into the truth we need to know.

Let's look at one final example.

Robbie did not like confrontation, especially when the other person might become angry or upset with him. He tended to feel "bad" and then give in to the person, or he avoided difficult conversations altogether. Over the years this behavior had significantly affected his business life, and he knew he needed to change. He was forever getting the worst ends of lots of deals, and he was putting up with nonperformance and unfairness.

He recognized this about himself and wanted to be different. But it was not happening. Then Robbie realized God could help him in difficult confrontations, and he took a step of faith. He made a tough phone call and depended on God's Spirit to empower him. After he did it once and learned that stepping out in faith worked, other confrontations became easier. Finding out that character change could happen as he depended on the Spirit to help gave him a whole new arena for growth.

I have seen the same thing happen with other steps of growth people have had to take. Confession of pain, bringing things into the light from the darkness of their souls, opening up about feelings, taking risks in love and relationships, and asking God to empower with gifts and talents in career moves are all part of the scope of life in the Spirit. We are made to grow, to stretch ourselves into new arenas. But we are not made to do that without help. The Spirit will give us power to do what we could not do before, or at least to take the step to learn how.

The important thing to remember is this: The Spirit-filled life is a supernatural life that surpasses our strengths and abilities. We can depend on that. The Spirit has promised it. But this does not mean that we do not have to do anything. We still have to step out in faith. We have to risk. We have to love, open up, confess, reach out, repent, obey, and do all the other things we are commanded to do. Our part is to live the life. But we do not have to do it alone or in our own power. We are partners with the Spirit. Listen to how Paul taught that we work and the Spirit works at the same time:

Since we live by the Spirit, let *us keep in step* with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25).

I pray that out of his glorious riches *he may strengthen* you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith (Eph. 3:16–17).

The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the *one who sows to please the Spirit*, from the Spirit will reap eternal life (Gal. 6:8).

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to *his power that is at work within us* (Eph. 3:20).

The Bible teaches we are to do our part by faith and the Spirit will do his part by his power.

For Julie, this meant, "The struggle I have with eating I must do with faith in him to help me turn from food, pray, and call a friend to find out what is hurting me. So, God, help me do that right at this moment when I feel like snacking."

For Ted, this meant, "The battle I have with this addiction I have to fight by faith in him. Help me, God, to resist and to reach out."

For me, this meant, "The conflict I have to resolve with this woman I have to resolve by faith in him. Help me to see what to say, God."

For Robbie, this meant, "The fear I have of confrontation I must face with faith in him to help me step out and say the tough thing. Help me, God, through your Spirit to make that call and give me the words."

It is a real life and a practical life. It is not the life of summoning up will power and strength we do not possess. Instead, it is a life of summoning up faith that will be given to us and stepping out on that faith