

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

This series of reflections – which we’re calling ‘Wildfires’ – reflects on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, from the first verses of Genesis, to the last verses of Revelation. Often the ‘forgotten’ part of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is there at Creation and also at the climax of the New Creation, co-equal with God the Father and Jesus Christ, revealing the reality of God’s presence and power to the world throughout history. Over the next 61 days we’ll celebrate the Holy Spirit, and continue to welcome His presence in our lives today.

Day 1 – Genesis 1:1-2 ‘The Spirit in Creation’

In 1998, Dame Judi Dench won the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her role as Queen Elizabeth I in the film ‘Shakespeare in Love’. Despite the fact that she only appeared in the film for 8 ½ minutes, her presence as the reigning monarch was felt throughout, and, being the supreme actress that she is, when she does appear she dominates the screen.

In some ways the Holy Spirit plays a similar role in Scripture. Appearing only occasionally in the text of the first three quarters of the bible (the Old Testament), nevertheless the Spirit’s presence is known and felt throughout – and when the Spirit does appear front and centre in the narrative, whether ‘coming upon’ a Judge or King, or rushing through the room at Pentecost, the power and glory of God dominates the page.

If Jesus Christ is the unquestioned ‘hero’ of Scripture, the Holy Spirit plays the decisive supporting role. This is true even at Creation. Whilst New Testament writers St John and St Paul make it clear that Christ was the ‘Word of God’ declaring creation into being through the narrative of the bible’s first chapter, Genesis 1:2 tells us that it was the Spirit of God who was hovering (or brooding, in the marvellous phrasing of the old translations) over the waters, making Christ’s creative word a powerful reality.

From the beginning, God has always been a Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit, a perfect inter-relationship of love and glory. People often mistakenly think that God started as one, then became two with Jesus, and finally three at Pentecost. But Genesis 1 tells us otherwise. And *the extraordinary truth is that we are invited into that relationship*: effective through the work of Christ and the indwelling witness of the Spirit. We get to ‘eat with God, and God with us’ (Rev 3:20), to share in this divine web of love forever.

In this season we will explore what that means, and I hope this journey will reveal new depths to you about God, and your life in and with Him. But today, let’s reflect a moment that the fullness of the Spirit was only revealed many, many years after creation, at Pentecost. In the divine will and wisdom of God, what had always been there finally became a visible reality.

The fact that we bear God’s image means that this too can be a reality for us. Gifts and talents, causes and opportunities, can still come unexpectedly to the fore later in our lives. In God’s economy, all of life can be used for His glory. How is God at work in you currently? Are there deep facets of who you are being revealed for His glory, even now? As the Spirit of God hovers over the waters of your life, where might God be saying: ‘Let there be light....’?

God is always making everything new. Amen, come Holy Spirit.

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Day 2 – Genesis 2:7 ‘The Breath of Life’

If Genesis 1 is the big picture account of creation – the grand canvas – Genesis 2 is more personal and intimate: the tender portrait of a loving God making and relating to human beings, the glory of His creation. In Genesis 1 we learn that God makes humans in his image, both male and female. God blesses them and gives them authority. But what we don't learn is *how* God makes us. *How* is it that we can claim to bear God's image? In Genesis 2, we get the answer: 'The Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into the man's nostrils the breath of life.'

No other animal receives this particular intimate blessing: *the very breath of God*. And much as we can explain some of our human behaviour in evolutionary terms, necessary adaptations for our survival, or we can observe certain abilities which exist in certain species in the natural world, there remains much that is unique to humanity, or that we possess to an unparalleled degree. Our love of beauty, our capacity to organise, to create, to care for the vulnerable, to think objectively, to ask why.... This is what it means to be human; but even more, it is what it means to bear the image of God.

The principal word for Spirit in Hebrew is 'ruach'. It means breath or wind, and is the word used most often throughout the Old Testament. But there is a second, more intimate word for breath, more rarely used: 'neshama'. And it is this word 'neshama' which the writer of Genesis uses here. God breathes his *neshama*, his divine breath into us, and gives us life. Though the Fall shatters the perfection of our original nature – and scars the image of God in all of us – that divine breath, that *neshama* is still there. We are spiritual beings, trying to find our way home.

And the story of scripture from a human perspective is the story of how God, in Christ, is able to restore that true divine breath in all of us. Christ's death and resurrection points the way to the renewal of all things, and since Pentecost his followers now receive that divine breath, that Spirit, in a new way. Through Christ, God can dwell in us again by the Holy Spirit, and his breath of life transforms us from the inside out. It's a gift we don't deserve, but God in his great love and mercy joyfully bestows it on us, and points us towards home.

Take a moment today to just stop and breathe. Imagine the breath of God filling your lungs. Become aware of His presence. Receive His peace. And give thanks.

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Day 3 – Exodus 31:1-5 ‘Surprisingly creative?’

If I was to ask you to guess the first spiritual gift mentioned in the bible, what do you think it is? Preaching? Prayer? Miracles? Leadership? No, non, nein and nej. It's *creativity*.

You might be surprised to learn that the first person we encounter in the bible who is 'filled with the Spirit of God' is an artist, a craftsman: Bezalel (pronounced 'bed-za-lay-el'). We meet him in Exodus chapter 31, and it is God himself who declares that Bezalel is filled with the Spirit (v3). In fact, just in case we found it too surprising – and perhaps, like us, many of Bezalel's fellow Israelites did – it's repeated by Moses to the people in Exodus 35.

The church has always had an ambiguous relationship with the creative arts. We might marvel at our glorious mediaeval church buildings, but too often the arts have either been hijacked for the glory of proud humanity (in the name of God, which is far worse) or treated as idolatrous and ignored altogether. The church where my father was a minister in the 1980s was one of those where all the heads and hands had been hacked off the mediaeval statues by Thomas Cromwell's thugs.

As always, the two extremes – hubris and hatred – fall far short of God's intention. As we saw in Genesis 1, *God loves creating*, it's in his nature. No surprise then that his intention for humans – who bear his image – is just the same. We are made to create! And God loves that side of our nature. Whenever we create in God's name, we are filled with the Spirit, and witness to God's glory, just as good old Bezalel thousands of years ago.

And even if you're not a natural artist, we all get to create – when we cook, when we clear up, when we mend clothes, or tend our gardens, or try our hand at painting or crochet or pottery, or perfect the cross court backhand or do keepy-uppies, or just doodle when we're bored in meetings. *We're always creating*. And God loves that about you. Even if you're not sure you love that about yourself.

In this unusual season, many of us are trying new ways of creating, or investing more in the ways we already know. Keep doing that! It's who we are. And, even more, it's part of what it means to be 'filled with the Spirit of God.'

What are you creating today? Take a moment to stop and just feel God's pleasure. He loves it!

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Day 4 – Numbers 11:vv16-17,24-29 ‘Spread it around’

Leadership is a spiritual task. For all that there is a whole secular industry nowadays teaching leadership and management principles, the essence of good leadership – wisdom, humility, service, vision, empowerment – are things which reside in the nature and heart of God. It stands to reason, then, that the calling of true leadership is amplified and empowered by the Spirit of God.

This happens a lot earlier than we think in the bible. Well before King David, well before Gideon or Samson, or any of the Judges. You have to go back to chapter 11 of the book of Numbers. And, even more surprising, this gift of spiritual leadership was a corporate affair. No less than 70 people, along with Moses, were filled with the Spirit for the task of leadership.

The context? Moses is overwhelmed with the burden of leading God’s people. This has happened before (in Exodus 18), but this time, faced with another rebellion, Moses has had enough. ‘Kill me now!’ he says to God (v15), who wisely realises that this is a man at the end of his tether. So God provides Moses with 70 others to ‘share the burden of the people with you’ (v17).

What is fascinating is how God equips this leadership team: ‘I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them.’ (v17) The work of God needs the Spirit of God. Almost uniquely in the Old Testament, this work is shown to be something for *many*, not just for one.

And it is not limited to place, either. Two of the new leaders – Eldad and Medad – don’t get the memo, and miss the meeting. Yet, amazingly, they begin to prophesy too, out in the camp (v26). In a lovely foreshadowing of the sort of conversation the disciples have with Jesus, Joshua complains to Moses: it’s just not cricket! And, like Jesus, Moses says, effectively: ‘Calm down: you should be pleased. I wish everyone could receive the Spirit and prophesy!’ (v29)

The applications of this lovely story are numerous. We could reflect that leadership is a spiritual calling requiring spiritual equipping. We could rejoice that God is not limited to times and places, techniques and rituals. But let’s give thanks today that *there’s plenty enough of the Spirit to go round*. You might feel like Eldad and Medad – always missing the memo – but God doesn’t forget you. He can bless you and use you anyway.

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Day 5 – Judges 6:vv11-14,34-35 ‘Mighty warrior? Who, me?’

History is full of unlikely heroes. This year we’ve all marvelled at the astonishing story of Captain Sir Tom Moore, who started walking 100 laps of his garden in March and ended up being knighted and raising over £30 million. But even our ‘traditional’ heroes are often more unlikely than they seem. Read the following paragraph: who is this?

At the age of 7 he was the worst in his class. His school report declared that he ‘seems unable to learn anything.’ He was denied the secondary school of his choice by his father who considered him ‘such a stupid boy’. His father later wrote to him at college ‘Not only are you a complete failure... I see nothing ahead of you but failure.’ Who is this failure, hampered by a loveless childhood and a cold, disappointed father? None other than Winston Churchill.

The story of Gideon touches our hearts for many reasons. There is humour – Gideon means ‘mighty warrior’, but the bearer of this name is initially found hiding in the winepress. There is humanity, in Gideon’s very cautious response to his commissioning and the famous ‘fleeces’. There is also, ultimately, a happy ending (more or less), as Gideon’s tiny army miraculously defeats their adversaries. Along the way, we also encounter surely the strangest recruitment strategy in literature, as just 1% of Israelite army applicants were selected, determined by how they drank water from a stream.

But what we learn from Gideon is that identity comes before destiny. *God calls us according to what He knows that we are, not what we see that we are.* His Spirit looks inside our hearts and reveals our true identity. And from that, our calling. Gideon saw a frightened dropout; God saw a mighty warrior. And that should give us all hope.

‘Go in the strength that you have.’ This is a double encouragement. In human terms, God calls us to be ourselves. We don’t have to try to be someone else. In divine terms, *us plus God is enough.* When the Spirit finally comes upon Gideon, the strength that he has is more than sufficient to change the destiny of a nation.

Winston Churchill’s spirituality has always remained something of a mystery. But like Gideon, his childhood did not determine his future. He believed he would one day grow up to change the destiny of a nation. Nevertheless, what took the remarkable Churchill decades, God did by His Spirit through Gideon in a matter of weeks.

‘Go in the strength that you have.’ Us plus God is always enough.

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Day 6 – Judges 11:vv1-6,29-35 ‘Blessing versus bargaining’

In the lists of people’s ‘favourite stories of the bible’, the story of Jephthah is not likely to be one of them. And with good reason – it is a story of human brokenness from start to finish. Broken families, broken promises; and with tragic irony the one thing that apparently can’t be broken is Jephthah’s hubristic promise to sacrifice the first human or animal who appears from the door of his house after his victory.

But hidden in the midst of this most starkly human of stories is a story of grace. And one very simple encouragement: *God’s Spirit is a gift*. We don’t deserve it; we can’t earn it. He simply, freely and gladly gives it to us. It is all the grace of God.

Why did God choose Jephthah? On the face of it, there is no good reason. His upbringing was traumatic. His current lifestyle – a violent gang leader – was repulsive. There is barely a less deserving character.... and yet God restores him and anoints him with the Spirit.

No-one is beyond the rescue of God. No-one is outside the reach of the kingdom of grace. But there is a warning here, too. The fact that the Spirit is a gift means that it *cannot* be bought, or earned, or bargained for. The tragedy of Jephthah’s story is that, having received this extraordinary gift of grace he then tries to bargain for God’s favour by making a daft, and ultimately gruesome, promise.

The point is, he didn’t need to. He *already* had God’s Spirit. He *already* had His forgiveness, His favour. And we too must never assume that the path to greater spiritual wholeness is to bargain with God. ‘If you do this... then I’ll do that...’ Rather, we live in a new reality. We are God’s beloved children, nourished by a Father who gives us all things. Jephthah never grasped his new identity as God’s beloved child, and the tragedy is that this needlessly cost him his own beloved child.

So how do we grow? We learn *to become what we already are*. We fix our eyes on grasping and internalising what God has already given us, that we are new creations, that – in Christ and through the indwelling Spirit – we already have all that we need. This wells up to become a spring of gratitude inside us, and fosters a surrendered heart, in other words a strong determination to keep offering all that we are to God, because it’s His anyway.

Wherever you find yourself today – whether facing Jephthah-sized challenges or not – take a moment to dwell on who you are. *You* are God’s beloved child. His grace to you is all gift. And let the gratitude of your heart be your offering.

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Day 7 – 1 Samuel 10:v1,vv6-16 ‘It’s not how you start, it’s how you finish’

Poor old Saul. One of the notorious tragic-comic figures of the bible. A man who never really knew who he was. Chosen to be king for his physical attributes – as if being tall and handsome was the best qualification for leadership! – we first encounter him wandering around the desert searching for his father’s lost donkeys. One senses that this sense of aimlessness was not lost on the marvellous writer of 1 Samuel, whose deadpan style reveals as much by what it does *not* say as what it does. I like to imagine the author pursing their lips and raising an eyebrow as they write...

Nevertheless, Samuel finds Saul (v1) and – ignoring his protestations of unworthiness: ‘am I not the least of the smallest?’ (9:21) etc etc – anoints him king. Samuel declares that the Spirit will come upon him (v6) and it duly does (v10), confirmed by the fact that Saul starts to prophesy – a sure sign of spiritual connectedness.

What is interesting is that Samuel declares that being filled with the Spirit will ‘change Saul into a different person’ (v6); and we know that, for a while, it does. Saul makes an unexpectedly good start as king: he leads an army to rescue Jabesh and is filled again powerfully with the Spirit (11:6) In fact, he starts well enough for Samuel formally to lay down his leadership straight after that victory.

But, as we know, things go rapidly downhill from there. Saul never internalises his true identity: despite the early promise, he remains deep in his soul a lost young man wandering after his donkeys and hiding in the luggage (10:22).

This reminds us that our spiritual journey is a lifelong journey. Yes, we need the Spirit every day, every hour. But ultimately, *it’s not how we start, it’s how we finish*. We may look back at great seasons in our lives, but the question is always: what is God doing in me *now*? How am I growing? Where will He lead me next? *Do I still know who I really am?*

Saul’s spiritual awakening was not without its detractors. Those who knew Saul by reputation mocked his prophesying (v11-12). And we too must be ready to face those who will pooh-pooh our spiritual growth, or continually reduce the spiritual journey to one of human effort. *What begins as a work of God must remain a work of God* – as St Paul warned the young church in Galatia: ‘After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?’

But the real issue was not those who teased Saul. When the freshly anointed, Spirit-filled Saul returns to his uncle (v14), he is unable to tell him the big news. And this is the heart of the problem: the problem of Saul’s heart. Saul’s spiritual journey remained skin-deep. He *did* stuff, but he never knew who he really was.

Today, let’s give thanks for all that God has done in us thus far. Let’s receive that precious truth that we are, and remain, God’s beloved children. But most of all, let’s ask for grace to keep on keeping on. To be led by the Spirit. To listen, and learn, and let God continue to work His will in us. After all, it’s not how we start, it’s how we finish.

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Day 8 – 1 Samuel 16:vv1-13 ‘The heart of the matter’

For much of our driving lives, we’ve driven old cars. For the last 10 years, that’s been a pair of first-generation Nissan Micras. Fantastically well-made, almost indestructible cars. In fact, we’ve only moved on to something marginally less old because it was getting hard to find replacement parts. Woody (as we knew our last car) was just too ancient to fit the diagnostic tool at the mechanics.

Our kids became increasingly embarrassed about these beaten-up old bangers (as they saw them). Yet the point was: these cars might not look like much from the outside – but what was inside was brilliant. The engine, the gearbox, the *heart* of the car was superb, and was why we stuck with them for 10 years.

In contrast, we’ve just offloaded the best looking car we’ve ever owned. When we drove it away from the seller we were congratulating ourselves on a bargain... until we took it for its MOT a few days later and discovered it needed £1,000 of repairs. Bizarrely, it passed the MOT – it could still function on the road – but underneath the pristine exterior it was severely damaged.

This contrast is a perfect illustration of the difference between King Saul and King David. *Why was David feted through history as Israel’s greatest king, yet Saul was seen largely as a failure?* Both were anointed by the same prophet, both received the Spirit, both were chosen by their people. Both had their failures, too. And yet, one died in disgrace, the other became the ancestor of the greatest King of them all.

The answer is not what was outside. In any beauty contest, Saul would win hands down: he was much taller and more physically imposing, and although David was ‘ruddy and handsome’, Saul was ‘as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel.’

It was what was inside that mattered. As we observed yesterday, *the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart*. For all his gifts, his physical attributes, his calling and even his anointing by the Spirit, Saul’s heart was never right. By contrast, it was David’s heart that set him apart. Inspired by God, Samuel saw in David the character of a true king: ‘People look at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart.’ (v7)

So when the Spirit filled David (v13), it was working in tandem with a heart that was already in fine shape: brave and humble, merciful and generous, purposeful, rooted and secure. *David knew who he was*: a child of God, set apart for His purposes. God’s Spirit went deeper than surface behaviour to mould this heart yet further into one that was fully surrendered to God.

God never forces himself on us. He works with the grain of who we are, and how far we let Him in. The greatest work of the Spirit is not in the outward things: great deeds, miracles, heroic achievements. It is *what goes on inside: the Spirit’s transforming work in the heart*. The Spirit was the world’s greatest heart surgeon long before we invented the job.

May we too offer our hearts fully to God, to the Spirit’s transforming love and power, that it too may be said of us, like David, that we are people ‘after God’s own heart’.

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Day 9 – 2 Kings 2:v1,vv9-16 ‘Pass it on’

On one of the shelves in my study is an old pocket bible. It belonged to the first person for whom I took a funeral. He died without next-of-kin, and the care home where he was a resident asked if I would like to have it, otherwise it would just be thrown away. It turns out that I am the fourth owner: the bible previously belonged to the chap's father, who was called Fred. Fred in turn received it from the Tabernacle Sunday School 'on his promotion to the bible class' in 1903.

As humans, it's natural to pass things on. In fact, much of the time we can't help but pass things on. Some of these things are good and healthy. Sadly, some aren't: we need no reminding in the current season of what can pass between one human and the next.

Whilst most of us will have mementoes and keepsakes from people we've known and loved, often *the things that 'pass on' to us are less tangible, but far more important*. I have very few physical objects to remind me of my late mum, but the unseen things she gave to me – unconditional love, a listening ear, the value of gentleness, a love of music and books – are with me all the time, and have changed my life for the better. I hope that I can likewise pass these on to my own children, and maybe others too.

In today's reading we see something else pass on from one human to the next – this time, it is the Spirit of God. The great prophet Elijah's life and ministry is coming to an end, and his young protégé Elisha is about to take over the reins. As the two prepare to part ways, Elijah asks him one last question: 'what would you like from me?' Elisha's answer is unusual but inspiring: 'A double portion of your spirit.' God is obviously pleased with this answer, as Elisha inherits exactly as requested.

Now whilst we must admit that the circumstances of this story are unusual – not many of us get taken up in a whirlwind to heaven – nevertheless, *the process by which the Spirit 'transfers' from Elijah to Elisha is not so strange as we might think*. It was the common practice of the early church to commission new leaders by laying hands on them, and likewise, the 'laying of hands' has typically characterised the Christian ministry of healing too. Whilst the Spirit is always a gift of God and cannot be bought, enhanced or manipulated by humans, the Spirit can be conferred prayerfully and under God's direction between one human and the next. After all, the Spirit's purpose is to glorify Jesus and when we pray for healing, or commission new leaders, Jesus is glorified.

Take a moment today to give thanks for those who have blessed you, who have conferred God's grace to you, whose friendship and leadership have helped you grow in the spiritual life. And perhaps, reflect too on who you might in turn be able to bless. Pass it on!

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Day 10 – Ezra 1:1-5 ‘God at work in unlikely people’

‘This is what the Lord says to his anointed, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armour, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: I will go before you and level the mountains... I will give you hidden treasures, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, who summons you by name.’

I wonder, who was that written about? It’s from the book of the great prophet Isaiah. Care to hazard a guess? I imagine most of us would guess ‘The Messiah’ or Jesus, maybe another prophet who was to come. In fact, it was King Cyrus of Persia – the most powerful human being in the world at the time, and ruler of a huge empire that included the conquered and humiliated nation of Israel. A sort of enemy, certainly not Jewish, and even more surely not identified as ‘one of God’s people’. Indeed, the prophecy (from Isaiah 45) continues: ‘For the sake of Jacob, my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honour, *though you do not acknowledge me.*’

It’s strange, isn’t it? That God would use a pagan emperor to achieve his purposes. And more than that, to call him God’s ‘anointed’ – that is the language of spirit-filled kingship. Given to a pagan emperor! And yet, in our reading for today, Ezra insists: it was *God* who ‘moved the heart of Cyrus’ to allow the exiled Israelites to return to the promised land; and even more, amazingly, to worship their God in the temple.

The Lord, as it has often been observed, moves in mysterious ways. And his Spirit can be at work in the most unlikely people. God took a Christian-murderer and made him the world’s greatest evangelist (Paul). A disgraced exile who had difficulty speaking in public and made him the rescuer of God’s enslaved people (Moses). A hated Roman soldier to be the first to recognise Jesus’ divinity on the cross, and another one to be the first non-Jew to be filled with the Spirit.

The Spirit, like the wind, blows where it pleases. Which is great news for us. And great news for our friends and family. And, we pray, for our world too. God can be at work, *is* at work, in ways we can’t predict. No-one is beyond His reach, and even when people still do not acknowledge Him, God is able to use them wonderfully for His purposes.

King Cyrus did more for God’s people than at least half of their actual kings. Let’s pray for our leaders, that God would do the same again today. And let’s also raise faith to pray for those we love, too.

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Day 11 – Psalm 51 ‘The Spirit of repentance’

King David was evidently a person of great spiritual anointing. As a young man, the Spirit came on him in power when Samuel declared him king, and the following 30 or so years of his life were marked largely by success and godly fervour. The ark (central to Israel’s worshipping life) was restored, enemies were subdued, and individuals were treated with remarkable grace and generosity of spirit for the time. It is safe to assume that the Spirit of God was much at work during this era – an assumption reinforced by the scene of David ‘dancing before the Lord with all his might’ (and not a hint of embarrassment) in 2 Samuel 6.

David was justly called ‘a man after God’s own heart’... and yet, suddenly, in his late forties he has a spectacular moral lapse. Adultery leads to murder, and David is broken. Psalm 51 is perhaps his most heartfelt Psalm, and speaks to many of us who are, perhaps, more used to life in the valley than the mountaintop. We love David’s effervescent Psalms of joy like 8, or 18-21, but Psalm 51 touches our *soul*, and gives us language to approach God when we know there is stuff in our lives that needs healing and renewing.

As we have observed before, the Spirit’s purpose is to glorify Jesus in the world, and that covers so many things: growing in love, learning the truth, being empowered to serve – but also, when necessary, to convict us of selfishness, and stir in us a desire for purity. The word *repent* means ‘to turn around’ or to change: and the Spirit speaks to our hearts and places in us that desire for change.

In this case, a humbled David pleads with God to ‘take not your Holy Spirit from me’ (v11), and instead asks for a willing (v12) and steadfast (v10) spirit instead.

The good news of the Psalm is that the assurance of God’s forgiveness creates in David an overflowing of praise (v15) and witness (v13). His heart is restored (v17) and a new path opens up before him.

This too can be our journey. As the Spirit convicts us and leads us back to God, so we too find a new heart of gratitude, praise and willingness to share the goodness of God. We discover that there *is* hope, and that our loving God is still with us, deep in our heart.

May Psalm 51 be our prayer today.

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Day 12 – Psalm 104:vv1-4,27-35 ‘The Spirit of renewal’

For most of us, 2020 has been a spring like no other. The effects of COVID-19 will be long-lasting, and its memories will live with us for the rest of our lives. And yet alongside the pain and the challenges of this season, for many of us ‘a spring like no other’ holds true in a different sense. The enforced quietness of the season has led us to connect with nature more than we’ve ever done.

Nature itself has benefitted hugely from the sudden ending of many of the unsustainable and destructive patterns of human living so affecting the planet. Add into the mix the sunniest spring since records began, and the result has been a unique cocktail of tragedy and beauty, of death and life, of disruption and renewal all at the same time.

BBC Springwatch was particularly good this year: and perhaps some of you, like me, have been watching in wonder, and learning a lot at the same time. Nowadays we can explain much animal behaviour in terms of evolutionary adaptation, and that’s all well and good. But the Bible also points to a deeper truth, and one which we can also celebrate: that *the natural world reflects the glory of God*. Its beauty and power points to God’s beauty and power, and causes us to praise and worship. Time spent in nature is not just good for our physical and mental health, but our spiritual health too.

At its heart, nature is about irrepressible life. Having lived most of my life in urban London, I used to marvel at the flowers pushing up between the cracks of paving stones or attaching themselves to holes in walls as I walked around Streatham. Hard as we human beings tried to remove it, nature always found a way to push emerging life through the cracks.

God, too, ultimately is about irrepressible life – or ‘life in all its fullness’ as Jesus described it. That is His purpose for all of us: eternal, irrepressible life. ‘When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground,’ declares the Psalmist (v30).

Take a moment today to reflect on your ‘nature moments’ of this year. For me, it has been watching the flowering season of the glorious rhododendrons in the woods, and the pair of greater spotted woodpeckers using our birdfeeder. It could be anything: the blossom on the trees, the dawn chorus, a clear blue sky. And let that fill your heart with praise for the God who ‘stretches out the heavens like a tent’, who at His heart, is the giver of irrepressible, eternal life.

Praise the Lord, O my soul.

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Day 13 – Isaiah 11:1-9 ‘New shoots’

The opening chapters of Isaiah make for fairly sobering reading. Whilst there are the great prophecies we treasure and read at Christmas – the virgin birth of ch7, the ‘Wonderful Counsellor’ of ch9 – Israel is largely challenged by God for its lack of attention to Him and His ways.

Isaiah prophecies that other nations will overpower them as a result: and yet, studded amidst the calamitous prophecies of judgement, there is always hope. The nations surrounding Israel will likewise too be brought low eventually, their leadership judged for its pride and self-reliance: ‘See, the Lord Almighty will lop off the boughs with great power. The lofty trees will be felled....’ So ends ch10: what comes next? How will God’s people recover? These timeless words are what follows:

‘A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit.’ (v1)

Renewal is coming! And note, it is not a brand new plan, rather the restoration and true recovery of an old one. A righteous ruler filled with the Spirit of God (v2-5), who will lead the people into the glorious future that God plans for His people (v6-9).

As we have seen over the last couple of weeks, the Old Testament had its fair share of Spirit-anointed leaders. The Spirit was apt to empower *particular* people for *particular* things, and, looking at v2, these famous characters all manifested some of the attributes of true spiritual maturity: Solomon had the Spirit of wisdom and understanding; Samson had the Spirit of might (though definitely *not* of counsel), David excelled in the knowledge and fear of the Lord. But none of them had the lot.

Until now. Someone new was coming. Someone who possessed all of these qualities, and more. Whose judgements would protect the poor and needy, and judge the wicked; who would be known for faithfulness; and ultimately who would usher in an era of peace and harmony.

God’s people had to wait 700 years for this person: Jesus, the true and righteous king. And whilst his gentle rule continues to extend into human hearts across the world, we too ache with longing for the final reign of peace promised in this remarkable chapter. It will come, as surely as the waters cover the sea. But, for now, we wait, and pray, and try to copy our boss as best we can. To grow in wisdom and understanding. To delight in God. To seek the peace and justice of this world.

The shoot of Isaiah has become a great tree, and we are branches grafted in. Today, let’s pray that our branch bears fruit, filled with the same Spirit that rests on him.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 14 - Isaiah 61:vv1-3 'The year of the Lord's favour'

A 30-year-old man arrives for weekly worship in his home town. He's lived there since he was a child, worked in the town with his father, and no doubt most of his family are sat with him that morning. It's his turn to read from the scriptures, and when the time comes he gets up and walks to the front. The eyes of everyone are fastened on him, and he begins to read....

It could have been any ordinary Saturday 2,000 years ago. A traditional community, a traditional synagogue, the familiar rhythms, the same faces, a particular quirk of the Nazareth reading rota (nothing changes – every worshipping community needs a rota!). True enough, the passage was especially stirring – Isaiah 61, one of the great prophecies about the liberation of Israel, the new and radical in-breaking of the kingdom of God: 'The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me...'

But no-one could have foreseen what happened next.... 'Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' Those words did not just shatter the peace of a quiet, conservative, rural community – they changed the world. The reader had just claimed that the anointed Servant of God promised 600 years ago by the kingdom of Israel's greatest prophet was here – and not just here, was *him*!

And so an uneventful Saturday in Nazareth finds its way into the pages of Scripture – Luke ch4 – and heralds the start of Jesus' public, Messianic ministry. Jesus claimed to be the fulfilment of Isaiah 61 – soaked in the Spirit, he was the One who would bring about God's true purposes for humanity.

What is the kingdom of God about? Isaiah 61 is a pretty good summary. Ultimately it is about *God's favour freely given to flawed human beings*. What does that favour look like? Just as the passage describes it: it looks like good news, healing, freedom, joy and praise. Those who were once beaten up and bowed down can now become a 'planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour.'

And this is what the Spirit of the Lord comes to bring – for us and for our world. It is good news! Our past does not have to define our future. What has bound us, or blinded us, or led us into mourning and despair can be put right. We can enjoy 'the year of the Lord's favour' – not just this calendar year, but every year.

Today, take a few moments to remind yourself of all the things that make what we believe *good news*. It could be the wonderful promises of this passage, the assurance of God's unconditional love, or anything else besides. Jot them down if it helps. And let that turn our despair into praise.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 15 – Ezekiel 36:vv24-28 ‘A heart of flesh’

How does a person become good? This fundamental question has been exercising humanity since time began. We are moral beings; we understand concepts of goodness and badness, we know that some lives are better than others, and some actions are better than others. But knowing something is one thing: *doing* it is a different matter!

Many huge brains have thought long and hard about this, and many societies have orchestrated elaborate schemes to engineer it. But it basically comes down to one of two options: either you try really hard to be good yourself, or someone else forces you instead (usually through a system of compliance and punishment). It helps if you have a clear and detailed understanding of what it means to be good – and this is actually harder than it sounds, it’s a massive problem at the moment in our post-truth culture. But assuming you know roughly what you *should* be doing, the usual ‘answer’ to being good is all about human effort: either self-motivated, or enforced by others.

But what if that doesn’t actually work? What if this whole endeavour is ultimately bound to fail? What if even the most perfect law can’t make people good? What then?

This was God’s dilemma with Israel. 700 years of trying, and the basic problem was the same. God’s people either couldn’t, or wouldn’t, do the right things consistently. And the bible insists that this is not the fault of a particular nation: it is the human condition. Hard as we try, no-one can be good all the time. And even those we call ‘good people’ are often driven by decidedly mixed motives.

A totally new solution is needed. The problem is not the law or our capacity to act – it is what’s *inside* us. If this isn’t right, then our actions (even our ‘good’ ones) won’t be either.

There’s much more to say about this in future daily inspirations. But for now, let’s be encouraged by this beautiful promise given to Ezekiel: ‘I will remove from you your heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh.’ In other words, God says, you’ll start to feel what I feel, to be ‘soft’ to my love and my ways. But *you can’t do it yourself*. This is a work of the Spirit: ‘I will put my Spirit in you, and move you to follow my decrees.’

Today, let God fill your heart again. Ask Him for that new heart, even if you haven’t ever done that before. And ask Him to move you, to show you where your heart needs to soften, to be moved to follow Him. And give thanks that it’s not how hard you try, but how much God’s goodness can transform yours.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 16 – Daniel 5:8-12 ‘Infectious integrity’

Every year or two I go on a pilgrimage. Not the usual kind of pilgrimage, I must confess. Mine is to the Rembrandt rooms at the National Gallery in London. Mostly I go to gaze at the two self-portraits: one painted when Rembrandt was 34 and at the peak of his powers; the other a few months before his death aged 63, penniless and broken. The old Rembrandt almost fades into the canvas, and yet carries a new humility and compassion which touches me profoundly.

In the room you can also see one of Rembrandt’s most famous and greatest paintings, which depicts the scene described in our story today from Daniel 5. (You can take a look on their website here: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/rembrandt-belshazzars-feast>) Like the story, it’s called Belshazzar’s feast, and perfectly captures the dramatic moment when the King sees the ethereal divine hand appear and is seized by terror (vv5-6). Here is a fantastic image of human pride and power laid low, humbled by the greater power of the Almighty. The most powerful man in the world at the time (not for much longer!) is revealed for the fragile human being he was.

King Belshazzar was a pagan, but what is remarkable about this story is how the terrified court quickly turns to an elderly Jew for help. Daniel had faithfully served Belshazzar’s father for decades, and had helped out King Nebuchadnezzar in a similar way in ch2. Although their worldviews were very different, Daniel’s Spirit-filled wisdom was plain for all to see, and held in high honour even by a pagan court. By bravely living his faith out in the public square, Daniel’s infectious integrity had quietly exercised profound influence at the heart of power, and continued to do so. Through Daniel and others like him, God revealed his glory, such that even Nebuchadnezzar met with God in a deep and life-changing way (ch4).

The whole book of Daniel – including this story in ch5 – is a healthy reminder that *when the Spirit of God is at work, the effects can be seen*, even among those who would not profess the same faith. They may describe it in different ways – ‘the spirit of the holy gods’ (sic, v11) – but they knew divinely inspired wisdom when they saw it.

Many of us today are very conscious that followers of Jesus are very much in the minority, that most of our colleagues, friends and maybe even family do not share our beliefs. But we can take heart from the example of Daniel that a deep spiritual life *always* speaks to those around us, perhaps in very unexpected ways.

And who knows, we too may be given opportunities to speak and to bring the presence of the true and living God, just as Daniel was. Thanks to the indwelling Spirit of God, we may be far more influential than we realise....

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 17 – Joel 2:23-32 'The Spirit poured out'

Have you ever been caught in a summer storm? The sensation of being drenched by warm rain is something extraordinary to experience. Recently, my home town was hit by a few such deluges, and if you were lucky or unlucky (take your pick) to be caught in one, you'll have some measure of the true sense of the word 'downpour'.

What does it look like when the Spirit is poured out? How are we 'drenched'? The prophecy given to the prophet Joel suggests that the most obvious mark will be an *increase in direct communication from God himself*. The sort of encounters usually reserved for 'holy people' like prophets – prophecies and visions – will now be commonplace for young and old, male and female: in other words, all of God's people.

The church has largely had an uneasy relationship with this idea. Whether through fear of losing control or risk of this gift being abused, generally we have been more comfortable restricting the outpouring of this kind of spiritual anointing to certain 'leaders'.

But this was not God's intention. The kingdom is for the lost, the last and the least, and *often it is those we least expect who become agents of God's will*. And not just in the pages of the bible. For example, some years ago one of our best friends ended up leaving London and becoming a missionary through a word spoken to her by one of the children she taught at Sunday school. The child, I suspect, was unaware of how God had used her, but the word transformed our friend's life!

It is important, though, to set this wonderful prophecy of Joel in its proper context. The verses before and after vv28-31 describe what the true salvation of God looks like – both at a corporate and individual level. God's favour is restored to his people, and 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' This is vital when talking of things like prophecy and visions, because it reminds us that God's ultimate purpose is our salvation, in the broadest sense of the word: not just forgiveness of sins, but *renewal and wholeness at every level* – becoming the people God made us to be.

And as God draws us into this wholeness, as we truly recognise that He is our God and we are his children, so the Spirit is poured out into our hearts. The Spirit is not an impersonal force but a healing relationship of love. This guards against the sort of 'prophecies' that give such revelations a bad name. It also encourages us to trust that as we grow in our relationship with God, *He really can, and does, speak to us with words, dreams and visions*.

You may or may not have received something like this. But why not seize faith to believe that one day – maybe even soon – you just might?

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 18 – Zechariah 4:1-9 ‘Not by might nor power’

The wind and the sun once had an argument as to who was the most powerful. The sun smiled: ‘See how I can dry up the desert.’ ‘Pah!’ scoffed the wind. ‘That’s not power! Look at what I can do to the trees, even entire oceans. See how they tremble when I blow.’ As they were arguing, a man walked below them, dressed in an overcoat. ‘Tell you what,’ said the sun. ‘The one who can get the overcoat off the man wins.’

The wind agreed straightaway: ‘That’s easy – I’ll go first.’ And the wind blew. And blew. And blew some more. The man was nearly blown off his feet, but every time the wind blew, he wrapped his coat more tightly round his body than before.

After an hour, the wind was exhausted. ‘My turn, I think,’ said the sun, who appeared beyond a cloud and shone bright and beautiful in the sky. Within minutes the man mopped his brow and immediately took off his coat.

We humans love to exercise power. ‘Might is right’ is an old saying, and tragically common in its application. We battle in relationships, in committees, in government, against nations. We lift weights for our muscles, and play Sudoku for our brain power. We talk about willpower, horsepower, firepower, superpower... even flower-power! You want to get things done? You need power.

Or maybe not. *Maybe in the crazy, upside-down, topsy-turvy kingdom of God, different rules apply.* The prophet Zechariah was worried: how on earth was the temple going to be rebuilt? The Jewish exiles had returned to Israel, but they lacked the means to do what they believed God was calling them to do. They needed a plan, a strategy, they needed money and people, talents and resources... or did they?

God’s plan was different: ‘Not by might, nor by power, *but by my Spirit.*’ Every true work of God is birthed in the realm of the Spirit. Sure, God often needs our efforts at some level. But if we make the mistake of thinking that it’s *all* about us, we’re in trouble. Psalm 127 provides a healthy corrective: ‘Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain.’ Or as a wise teacher once said to a young preacher: ‘Never forget that it’s what God does between your lips and their ears that really matters.’

You may be facing a huge task or challenge, and you know your own resources aren’t up to it. Let this word be an encouragement to you today. There is another way. And our confidence is found in the last word of v6. Whose Spirit is it? The Lord *Almighty*’s. No human power even comes close.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 19 – Luke 1:11-17 ‘Filled for fruitfulness’

‘Behold, I am doing a new thing! ...Do you not perceive it?’ (Isaiah 43:19)

We use the word revolution a lot nowadays. But in truth, genuine revolutions are very rare. It may in fact be that we are living in one of those rare times, as the impact of COVID-19 forces us to re-imagine our whole way of life. Certainly this year we have witnessed a revolution in church life greater than anything since the Reformation, as large sections of the global church have moved online, and formed their community and mission in a completely new way. Whilst the change for some churches may prove to be temporary, for others, we may look back in decades to come and understand that something fundamental truly shifted in this season. Forced by circumstances beyond our control, nevertheless God birthed a great and unforeseen “new thing”. ‘Do we not perceive it?’

The prophet Isaiah also foresaw a ‘new thing’ – only this time its effects would only come to pass almost six centuries later. Many times over the vast intervening period, God’s people must have wondered – ‘is this the new thing?’ – only to witness so many false dawns. And then, suddenly, a faithful old priest wanders into the temple one evening and.... everything changes. A new prophet is coming, miraculously conceived, and uniquely ‘filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born’ (v15).

I do feel some sympathy for Zechariah’s incredulity. But, at long last, what Isaiah saw all those years ago was finally coming to pass. The Spirit was once again on the move, and the world would never be the same.

It is interesting to reflect on the significance of John’s early spiritual anointing. We might rightly draw the conclusion that, in the age of the Spirit, children are now included in the outworking of God’s purposes as never before. And many of us can testify that this is true. We might also see John’s unique anointing as a prophetic staging post to another child – John’s cousin – who is not just filled with the Spirit, but *conceived by* God the Holy Spirit six months later.

But today, let’s notice that John’s spiritual anointing was for a purpose. *He was filled for fruitfulness.* His task would be to ‘go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord’ (v17).

We can sometimes caricature seeking the Spirit as some sort of sanctified ego trip, to feel something like a great big cuddle from God. And, occasionally, that is what we need. But most of the time, God draws near to us and fills us with His Spirit for a reason. *We are filled for fruitfulness.* God has plans for each of us, which He empowers us to fulfil by His Spirit.

Lockdowns and viruses do not frustrate God’s purposes. Nothing does. We all still have a part to play. How is God filling you for fruitfulness? What is The Spirit empowering you for in this season?

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 20 - Luke 2:25-32 'Moved by the Spirit'

I love this story. I make no apologies for including it in these daily inspirations. Simeon has got to be one of my favourite characters in the Bible. He only appears in this one episode, but what a cameo! A lifetime of faithfully walking in God's ways crystallised in this one moment.

I don't know if you've ever got up one morning with an idea that there was something you absolutely *had* to do. Or perhaps you pass someone in the street and know you need to talk to them. Or maybe in this season it's a phone call you've got to make. And you discover to your surprise and delight that you called at just the right time, or the person you approached needed help, or that thing you 'had' to do was something you would have missed if you'd left it till tomorrow.

If you've had that experience, you may well have been 'moved' by the Spirit. Our God is a God who speaks. *And still speaks today*. So we shouldn't be too surprised to get these 'urges' every so often.

But let's notice that Simeon's crowning moment is not the first mention of the Spirit in this passage. Simeon's whole life was infused by the Spirit – the text says simply that the Spirit was 'on him' (v25). God can speak to anyone: but it happens a lot more often to those with whom He dwells all the time. The more we allow God to soak our lives, the more these 'divine promptings' are likely to happen. Like picking out your family in a crowd, it's much easier to spot things you're totally familiar with.

Simeon's moment was also preceded by a prior revelation. He already knew that he would see the Messiah one day. One of the gifts of the Spirit is the gift of prophecy – the capacity to see what God is up to. And Simeon clearly had this gift: and he believed what God had told him.

So when he got the 'nudge' one day that he had to go to the temple, his lifetime of spiritual soaking and seeing led him to one simple act of obedience which changed the world.

You're never too old to be used by God. That would be a fine summary of Simeon's story. Or to put it another way: if you're used to walking with God – such that the Spirit is 'on' you too – some days you get to notice a significant step that you're being asked to take. What might that be at the moment? We might feel like the most unlikely people to be 'moved' by God – so it's just as well that it's not up to us! Perhaps our great and gracious God still has work for you to do?

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 21 – Luke 4:1-14 ‘Streams in the desert’

All of us, at one time or another, experience the wilderness. I remember just such a season back in 2002. I called it a season for ‘burying my face in the dust’. As I tried to articulate my thoughts, I wrote at the time that I was ‘easily broken, like a twig in a gale.... The world sits heavy on my shoulders; even gifts are burdens that weigh like boulders.’

Eventually I pulled through. My spirits lifted, not least with the arrival of a beautiful daughter, and a new calling as a father. Years later I was drawn back to today’s passage, and spotted something I hadn’t before. Jesus was ‘led by the Spirit’ into the desert (v1). In other words, his wilderness season was not a defeat or a mistake, it was *part of his spiritual journey*, one which God used to equip him for what lay ahead.

I too came to realise that what God had done in me was also significant in that season. It was undeniably painful, but also purifying. I learned my limits, but also my strengths. I had a greater capacity to empathise with others’ troubles. I was truly grateful at how strong and patient my wonderful wife was. And through it all, God had fathered me, and led me out the other side. Although, unlike Jesus, some of my wilderness season had been of my own making, nevertheless I could affirm that I too had been ‘led by the Spirit’ through the desert.

Desert seasons are horrible. Nobody asks for them. Few of us see the point of them until much later. And yet, God is in them. As Elijah found out all those years ago, *God does some of his best work in remote places*. He is found not just in the wind and fire but in the gentle whisper, the sound of drawn-out silence.

And after Jesus had undergone his own testing, he returned ‘in the power of the Spirit’ (v14). Note the change of language – before he was led by the Spirit; now he was *empowered*. That is often the outcome of a fruitful desert time. We may carry wounds: but *these very wounds become our source of authority and gifting*. The pain of loss turns into a capacity to counsel others. Our new-found humility enables us to carry responsibility better. Our learning of spiritual disciplines to counteract the desert experience become the practices which fuel our lives from now on. In other words: *our weakness, surrendered to God, becomes our strength*. We no longer live on bread alone – our physical capacities – but on God’s sustaining word.

Maybe this is a desert time for you. Take heart – God is in it. It may not feel like that now: but you will bounce back, in the power of the Spirit. ‘For when I am weak, then I am strong.’

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 22 – John 3:1-8 ‘Born of the Spirit’

What do you think about when you hear the phrase ‘born again’. Sadly many of us tend to associate the phrase with one particular expression of the Christian faith, with (what might seem to us) the ill-fitting cultural clothing that comes with it. We may think of a fiery preacher in an expensive white suit yelling ‘you must be boooooorn again’, or something equally memorable and unhelpful.

It is a great shame that the phrase has come into disrepute in recent years, because it’s one of the most important, dare I say it fundamental, phrases of the bible. And it wasn’t invented by Christians, not even folksy tabernacle evangelists. It was Jesus himself who said it. More than that, it wasn’t just something he recommended as a good way to look at the journey of faith: a nice idea we could use to illustrate a spiritual truth. He was far more insistent: ‘You *must* be born again.’

What’s the big deal? In the end it comes down to one of the great questions of life: *how do we live the life that God wants us to?* In the bible, the complexities of this question are neatly boiled down into one condensed but highly meaningful contrast: *the flesh versus the Spirit*. The ‘flesh’ is all about human effort: we live the life God wants by trying really hard – knowing all the rules and rituals, and then doing our best to follow them. This is how most religious worldviews operate, but there’s just one small problem – it doesn’t work. Our flesh is too easily corrupted, and even when we do the right things, we often do them for the wrong reasons.

The in-breaking kingdom of Jesus is totally different. When we follow him, *his Spirit dwells in us and transforms us from the inside out*. We begin a new life, indwelt by God. As our heart is changed and we develop Christlike virtues – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness – so we naturally ‘do’ the right things.

How can we describe this new life? Well, Jesus thought of one very good way: we are – you guessed it – ‘born again’ (v3, v6). Born of the Spirit (v5) i.e. to *a new spiritual life*, a God-infused heart which slowly learns to live as God wants. This is the Spiritual life, in the truest, most literal sense of the word. And, Jesus says, there is no other way: ‘no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless...’ (v5).

How can we tell where we are? Like the wind, we can’t ‘see’ God’s Spirit, but we can see its effects (v8). Take a few moments today to think about the ways you’ve changed and grown as a person as you’ve walked with God – that’s the effect of the divine Wind. And give thanks! Be encouraged that God continues to be at work in you.

And if you’re not yet sure about following Jesus, but would like to change, Jesus gives us the blueprint today. The great news is that it’s not about you, or your effort. It’s about having a heart which is open to Jesus, which lets him in to do what you can’t. Why not let God begin his new life in you today?

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 23 – John 4:19-24 ‘Spirit and truth’

‘May the force be with you.’ One of the most famous lines of cinematic dialogue, and one which certainly as a young lad in the playground I would happily shout at my mates as we ran around, pretending we were flying the Millennium Falcon or fighting Darth Vader.

Looking back now as an adult, I feel somewhat more ambivalent towards this phrase. Strange as it is to admit, it’s been hugely influential in shaping not just our media but also our religious culture. The tendency of the last 50 years or so has been towards seeing spirituality in terms of vague forces of good and evil which are unpredictable but can be harnessed by those ‘in the know’. The divine spirit is seen as a force, and naturally we want this ‘force’ (whatever you call it) to be with us.

Unfortunately, even Christians can be swayed by this way of seeing things – misunderstanding biblical images of wind or fire to give the impression that the Holy Spirit is really another force as well. In worship we have become increasingly prone to mistaking emotional highs for the true work of the Spirit, simply because we ‘feel it’. It’s the Star Wars Heresy (my name for it!) by another name.

Thankfully, Jesus sets us straight in this lovely story of his meeting with the Samaritan woman. There’s so much we could say about it, but today I just want to observe that *the Spirit is not a force, it’s a person*. And the great thing about that is that we don’t have to try and create situations where we can somehow feel a ‘force’ – if we want to know what the Spirit is like, we can look at the visible manifestation of this person (Jesus) and *see*. That’s so much better, isn’t it!

Since Jesus loves the truth, it follows that one of the most important qualities of the Holy Spirit is truth. And, as Jesus says in our passage today, real worship involves us worshipping ‘in Spirit and in truth’. *The two work together – the Word of God and the Spirit of God*. They both have the same goal in mind – to glorify Jesus in the world and in our lives.

They also work together in particular ways: Jesus tells us that the truth sets us free (John 8:32); St Paul tells us that where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17). Both the Spirit and the truth lead us to *freedom*. Elsewhere, Paul also says that as our mind is renewed (truth) so we are able to offer our lives to God, which is our ‘spiritual act of worship’ (Romans 12:1-2). Spirit and truth working together to help us lead *worshipful lives*.

Spirit and truth, truth and Spirit. Two sides of the same coin (and who ever heard of a one-sided coin?). It’s what a real relationship with God looks like. Jesus the living word, dwelling in us by his Spirit.

What truth is the Spirit speaking to you today? May it lead you into freedom!

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 24 – Luke 11:1-13 ‘Ask to receive’

One of the huge questions people often ask about the Holy Spirit is this: if the Holy Spirit is given to *all* followers of Jesus (which it is), why does Jesus tell us to ask for it? Which is it? Is it automatic or only given on request?

This question has caused endless debates within the Church. So you will find, in the blue corner, those who advocate that we don't need to keep asking because it is a once-for-all gift which we just need to cultivate. And, in the red corner, those who make much of the need to keep asking, that what we get at the start isn't enough. Seconds away...!

As is so often the case, the argument tends to polarise towards either/or, when actually *the bible seems quite comfortable with ‘both/and’*.

(As an aside, you'll find this a good rule of thumb in most debates about faith – the answer is usually not either/or, but both/and. We get into trouble whenever we try to ‘resolve it’ – far better to embrace both truths and live accordingly.)

The best way I can explain it is to think about birthdays. My son's birthday is in a week's time. He's been asking for various things for his birthday, which is great, and Alise and I will love to buy those things for him (mostly!). But since he's our beloved son, we would have bought him gifts anyway. He doesn't only get presents because he asked! He is *guaranteed* to receive gifts – it's just also nice for him to ask, so we know what to get.

Our Heavenly Father, God, looks at his children in much the same way. Note that this teaching on the Holy Spirit is set in the context of the Lord's Prayer. We pray to a loving heavenly parent who is delighted to give good gifts to his children. So we ask for the Spirit (v13) as one of the good gifts, knowing that God loves to answer that prayer. He's given us the Spirit anyway, but there's no harm asking, is there?

And because, as we observed yesterday, the Spirit is a person, with a personality, we can also afford to be specific. Yes, we can pray for more of ‘the Spirit’ in general, just as my teenage son might say ‘just buy me stuff, dad’. Or we can pray that the Spirit fills us with peace, or joy, or gives us the gift of teaching, or discernment into a situation – the equivalent of a more specific birthday gift, like, say an Xbox game or a pair of Nike shorts.

So let's rejoice that God gives the Spirit unconditionally to all who follow Jesus. And let's *also* rejoice that we can keep asking, confident in the words of our master, Jesus: ‘How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.’

What good gifts will you ask for today?

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 25 – John 14:15-27 ‘The Divine Advocate’

I must confess that I love watching legal dramas. There’s something about the intense atmosphere of a courtroom that draws you in. Something too about how truth is disclosed (or avoided), how arguments are massaged and presented, and ultimately, whether justice is served. Although many such dramas nowadays focus large amounts of time away from the courtroom – the preparations, the police interviews with witnesses, the personal lives of the protagonists – the key moment remains that time when the barrister (or advocate, to use another name for the role) gets to her or his feet, rustles their papers and addresses the witness. This is the moment when those of us watching at home sit forward on our chairs and draw a sharp intake of breath...

People need advocates. They need them in the justice system; but there are also other times when we might need them: to fight our corner, to defend those who can’t defend themselves. One of our good friends in London used to attend bankruptcy hearings with those being pursued for debt repayments, and his expert advocacy rescued dozens from destitution. An advocate is the sort of friend we need: full of energy, wise advice, and above all committed to us and our wellbeing.

There are lots of images for the Holy Spirit in the Bible, of which the most popular we have largely covered over the last few weeks: wind, fire, and water. The dove is also well-known, as shown at Jesus’ baptism or (by implication) in the famous story of Noah. But this passage gives us another unique image, and one which is particularly important because it is given by Jesus himself. How does Jesus describe the Holy Spirit? Here, as *our Divine Advocate* – in fact he’s so keen we absorb it that he tells his disciples twice – v16 and then again in v26.

Sometimes this word is translated ‘helper’ but that’s a bit cosy, the word is a little more dynamic than that. In the original Greek it’s *parakletos*, which is where traditional churches get the name ‘Paraklete’ to describe the Holy Spirit. (An old minister friend of mine grew up thinking that the priest kept saying ‘parakeet’ and spent his time as a child in church looking for a parrot flying round the building!) It literally means ‘one who comes alongside’.

Hence the modern translation of Advocate. The force of the meaning is of just the sort of good advocate we have described: *energetic, wise and committed to us*. And, uniquely, this Advocate does not just walk alongside us, but actually dwells in us (v17, repeated in v20). The Spirit’s heart speaks directly to ours, if I may put it like that. It is Jesus himself with us by his Spirit: loving us (v21), empowering us (v23) and teaching us all things (v26).

We often talk in church about whether we’re committed to Jesus. But this passage reminds us that the more important truth is that *Jesus is intensely, eternally, absolutely committed to us*. Just let that sink in for a while... What a thought to kickstart our day! Amen, hallelujah!

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 26 – John 16:5-15 The Divine Awakener

I wonder if you've heard the phrase applied to someone that they were a 'person of deep convictions'? Often it's used in the context of someone who effected great change, based on their principles: a Nelson Mandela or an Abraham Lincoln. But you might use it to describe a very principled friend or colleague. The word 'conviction' in this case refers to deeply and strongly held beliefs that determine the way they live, the things that sit deep in their heart.

We come across the word 'conviction' in the Bible too, and it means something similar. Jesus uses it here in this passage when he talks of the Spirit 'convicting the world of sin, righteousness and judgement' (v8). Modern translations might render it 'prove the world to be in the wrong', but the idea is that, prompted by God's Spirit, *people come to a deep awareness of truths which cause them to live a different way.*

In particular, Jesus says, these truths involve understanding that we fall short of being the people that God made us to be (sin), that this has eternal consequences (judgement), but that there is One who did not fall short and is able to sort things out on our behalf (righteousness – found in Jesus).

Although these are not easy truths to admit (especially in our modern culture) nevertheless without them the central act of the Christian faith – Jesus' death and resurrection – makes no sense at all. Jesus dies for a reason: the 'fallen-shortenedness' of every member of the entire human race for all of history. His righteousness wins for us what we could never claim for ourselves, and because of that we are forgiven, we are free, we become 'new creations'.

It's worth reflecting that whilst words like judgement might feel awkward for us, the fact that there *will* be a day when God puts everything right, when all the abuse and corruption and violence perpetrated by those who seem to have got away with it will be punished and dealt with, ought to bring us great comfort. What happens in this world matters profoundly to God, and He *will* make things right.

Jesus uses the word Advocate again here to describe the work of his Spirit, and we might like to observe that the Spirit can act as counsel for the prosecution as well as the defence, if I can put it like that. The Spirit defends our hearts, reassures us of God's love, and helps us see through the lies of the enemy. But there are also times when we need to be reminded that God calls us to be holy, and to cast ourselves again on His mercy. That is 'conviction' as Jesus describes it, and either way (prosecution or defence) Jesus is glorified, since in both scenarios it leads us back to Him.

Whilst the word 'convict' is usually applied to an ex-prisoner, this passage reminds us that *Christians are all convicts in a spiritual sense*: those who have had deep truths revealed to them, but – praise God! – are no longer in prison.

Today, invite the Spirit to speak those deep truths to your heart again. And rejoice in your convictions!

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 27 – John 20:19-23 ‘Re-creation’

During the lockdown of spring 2020, it sometimes became quite hard to remember what ‘mass gatherings’ used to look like, but one of the more unusual mass gatherings of people in the last couple of generations has been the popularity of re-enacting major battles. I remember watching one about 30 years ago in Suffolk – truthfully I can’t remember which battle was being re-enacted, but I do remember noticing that ‘dying’ in the battle seemed remarkably popular. Later, I wandered past the beer tent and realised why...

What we see here in today’s passage is a far more important re-enactment, one with eternal and global consequences. The Gospel of John is all about new creation, a re-telling of the story of Genesis. It begins in the same way: ‘In the beginning...’ In ch3, Jesus meets Nicodemus and tells him that he must be ‘born again’ i.e. re-created. And here, in John 20, the risen Jesus does something which appears quite odd: he *breathes* on his disciples. Again, in this season, we’re not too keen on anyone breathing on us, but bear with me, there is a vitally important reason here.

What Jesus does seems odd, until you compare it with Genesis 2 – we looked at it way back on day 2 of these reflections. There we saw God breathe his divine Spirit into human beings. Now, here in John – the ‘re-telling of Genesis’ – *our risen Saviour initiates a new act of creation*. When Jesus breathes on his disciples, he is effectively saying: ‘you are each God’s new creations now.’ What a thought that is!

When we become Christians we don’t just ‘join a religion’ or ‘try to be good people’. It’s far deeper than that. We start a new life: we *become new people*, filled with the Spirit of God. Through the work of Christ, God is creating a new humanity, able to worship and serve him, to be the pinnacle of His creation that we were always intended to be. Or as St Paul summarises elsewhere: ‘If anyone is in Christ: new creation! The old has gone, the new is here.’ (2 Corinthians 5:17)

It might not often feel like that, as we wake up wearily on a wet Wednesday in February, or struggle to say a few prayers before we go to sleep – but that is *who we are*. Jesus has put His Spirit in us, and we are made new. And we can observe that two consequences of this new life in our passage are peace (v19) and forgiveness (v23). Because we are at peace with God, we can be at peace with ourselves, with others, with our world.

Why not let that peace rest in your heart for a few moments now? *You* are Jesus’ new creation. Receive the Holy Spirit. Let Him fill you with peace today.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 28 – Acts 1:1-8 ‘To the ends of the earth’

In 1995, a man left his well-paid job in New York, moved to Seattle, and began a business operating out of the garage in his new rented home. He started by selling books in the newly emerging online market. The first book he sold was ‘Fluid Concepts and Creative Analogies: Computer Models of the Fundamental Mechanisms of Thought’ by Douglas Hofstadter. Catchy title, eh? Nevertheless, business boomed. Within two months, he’d sold books to all 50 states in America and to 45 countries overseas. And from there it just kept on growing.... For this was how Amazon started, and it made the man – Jeff Bezos – currently the world’s richest, on paper at least.

What starts small can sometimes grow in an extraordinary way. When Jesus left this world to return to his Father in heaven (today’s passage from the start of Acts), he left behind 11 leaders, a total group of 120, no money, and no buildings. In other words, not a lot to the naked eye. But his final words to them were clear: what he started would spread ‘to the ends of the earth’ (v8).

How? Well, if Jeff Bezos harnessed the power of the internet, Jesus’ followers were about to receive a totally different kind of power. They couldn’t earn it or create it, *they simply had to trust, wait and receive* (v4-5, repeated v8). Only when they *had* received it would they be empowered to take Jesus’ good news to those around them: first to the capital city, then to the rest of the country, and finally across the world.

It reminds us that the gift of the Spirit is *not just for our benefit, but for those around us*. Lovely as it is to experience the presence of God, His power equips us to serve, and especially to share what we believe. As we’ll see tomorrow, the disciples’ first experience of this demonstrated that truth probably more than they could possibly have dreamed.

Infectious faith is a work of the Spirit. It’s good to have a testimony, and to know what we believe. It’s good to be ready to share whenever the opportunity arises. But *most of all, we need the presence and power of God*: giving us divine appointments, the right words at the right time, and multiplying their effect in those we are sharing with.

It doesn’t mean being passive. But the great weight off our shoulders is that, ultimately, it’s not about us. It’s *God’s* work: we trust, we receive, we go – and we leave the rest to him.

Who do you know that God is at work in? Why not pray for them today? And pray for power to be God’s witness wherever you may get the opportunity. Amen, come Holy Spirit.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 29 – Acts 2:1-21 ‘Weak made strong’

You knew we’d get there eventually. Day 29 on our journey through the Spirit in the Bible and, yes, we’ve finally got to the passage that you might have thought we’d cover on Day 1: Pentecost, the pouring out of the Spirit in a new and glorious way: on all people, for all time.

There’s so much we could say about this wonderful passage. How the manifest presence of God came to Jesus’ friends in wind and fire. How it ignited mission, and fulfilled what we looked at yesterday, as the gospel could now reach ‘to the ends of the earth’. How it came at just the right moment, when multitudes of nations were gathered and could take this good news back to their homes and neighbourhoods. How it was mistaken for drunken behaviour and ridiculed, as sadly it sometimes still is today. How it represented a ‘new law’ for God’s people, which is what Pentecost had traditionally celebrated. How it brought Joel’s famous prophecy (day 17) to life...

And we can celebrate all of those things. But today, I feel drawn to sharing what it meant for the disciples, and how that might speak to us. I’ve been reminded recently of something profound written about St. Peter by the great Christian writer, G.K. Chesterton (and please forgive the non-inclusive language, Chesterton was of his time):

“When Christ at a symbolic moment was establishing His great society, He chose for its cornerstone neither the brilliant Paul nor the mystic John, but a shuffler, a snob, a coward – in a word, a man. And upon this rock He has built His Church, and the gates of Hell have not prevailed against it. All the empires and the kingdoms have failed, because of this inherent and continual weakness, that they were founded by strong men and upon strong men. But this one thing, the historic Christian Church, was founded on a weak man, and for that reason it is indestructible. For no chain is stronger than its weakest link.”

At the heart of our story today is Peter, who stands up before the crowds as a person transformed. Chesterton is right to note that Peter is essentially someone like us, and that this is why he proved such a great choice to lead in the upside-down kingdom of Jesus.

But this *Peter has a new power inside him*. He is no longer operating solely out of his human weakness, but in the power of Christ, which fills and equips Peter by His Spirit. Which means we can now look at Chesterton’s insight two ways: not just celebrating that God uses weak people (like us) to achieve His purposes. But also, since Christ indwells every Christian, then in fact every ‘weakest link’ is now *far stronger than we could ever dare to imagine*. Not our strength, but Jesus’.

Pentecost may have been a unique occasion, an unparalleled experience. But it speaks to a deeper truth for each of us: that the Spirit enables us to do things we could never have imagined possible. *The Spirit is still enabling us today*. What does – or might – that beautiful truth look like for you?

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 30 – Acts 4:23-31 ‘Spiritual grace for testing times’

True goodness unsettles people. It might seem a strange thing to say, but time and again it has been demonstrated in the history of the church. Jesus himself was of course the perfect example of this: but it didn't take long for his followers to discover the same reality. Opposition to the early Christians began remarkably quickly – in today's passage, Peter and John return from their first grilling by the authorities. What had prompted it was, of all things, an outstanding miracle. A man had been spontaneously healed, and Peter had spoken to the crowd which gathered about the powerful name of Jesus.

It is a sobering reminder that commitment to living a life of peace, kindness and welcoming the supernatural intervention of God is no guarantee that we will not face trouble. Shining the light of Jesus inevitably reveals darkness elsewhere, and there is in some humans a hatred of the idea that they might not be masters of their own destiny: that they might ultimately have to answer one day to a Higher Power, a Greater Being. We might obey the State, and be model citizens, in most things. But our truest and highest allegiance is to God, and powerful people in particular are prone to resent the idea that they can never ultimately control us, because our minds and spirits are free – with the uncomfortable implication that their power is limited, even puny, compared to the Lord of the Universe.

So perhaps it is not so surprising after all that Christians have often been seen as subversives, a threat to the natural (corrupt, human) order. Every time the power of God is revealed, the flaws of human power are laid bare, and it is this sense of losing control which led the authorities to try and force Peter, John and the early Christians to stop.

But *where there is opposition, God's grace is greater*. That is also a common theme of the history of the church. And here in Acts 4 we see the believers not only unite in prayer but also experience the power of God again: 'the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly' (v31). God's presence through his Holy Spirit was made all the more available to those under pressure because of their faith.

Let's notice, though, what the believers prayed for: an end to opposition? An easy time from the authorities? Not a bit of it. They prayed for *more* miracles, *more* opportunities to share their faith.

The great encouragement to any of us facing opposition to our faith is that *God will give us more grace*, more love, more spiritual power: in short, more of Himself. The challenge is that He may not remove the opposition: rather give us grace to push through it and out the other side.

Today let us pray this grace for all those around the world facing these challenges. Let's use Acts 4 as our prayer for them. And, if this type of challenge happens to be your situation too, take heart: God is with you in it. 'When we come to the end of ourselves, we come to the beginning of God.' Amen.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 31 – Acts 6:1-7 ‘Practically spiritual’

The spiritual life is often thought to exist ‘in another dimension’. And sometimes, it does. Miracles, prophetic words of knowledge, angelic languages – these are not ‘worldly’ things. But sometimes, we can fall into the trap of believing that unless it’s a bit weird or quite obviously ‘supernatural’, that the Spirit of God isn’t in it. We need to beware this line of thinking.

This lovely passage in Acts reminds us that the life of the Spirit *celebrates* practical gifts, and is well able to affirm them as God-given and extremely valuable for the kingdom. The ‘ideal church’ of Acts quickly gets its problems just like any other church. In this case, their social care programme – dedicated to feeding those in need – is not going well: some are being fed, others aren’t. And it’s causing arguments and allegations of discrimination.

The solution is wonderfully sensible. The apostles appoint seven new leaders to look after the church’s social care, which proves to be a spectacular ‘win-win’: both freeing up the apostles to focus on their core gifting, *and* blessing the practical care ministry, such that everyone is fed. The result, in fact, is not just practical benefit, but spiritual too - the church grows more quickly and reaches into new areas (v7).

What is notable in the appointment of the new leaders is that the first qualification is that they should be ‘full of the Spirit’. It assumes that they will have practical organisational gifts, but also looks for signs of spiritual maturity as well. *The spiritual and the practical blend together for God’s glory.*

Too often the church has neglected practical gifts. Yet the early church affirmed them. If you’re a gifted organiser, or good with your hands, or creative and artistic, these are God-given talents, which the Lord has given you for a reason. Rather than separating them from your ‘spiritual life’, it is far better *to surrender them to God, that He might use them for His glory.* That might be in the workplace, but it might also be in the Christian community. I couldn’t have survived the challenges of 2020 without some wonderful people offering their technical gifts to create our online services. What a blessing they have been to us!

But there is a further encouragement here. *As we grow spiritually, we might also find our practical gifting grow too.* As we become more Christlike, so those Christlike qualities will enhance the things we’re good at. We’ll see things with God’s eyes, care for people better than we work with or serve as clients, understand our own fears and motivations. These all help us to be more fruitful.

We humans are a marvellous, divinely-inspired concoction of body, soul and spirit. May God continue to grow our *whole lives*, that our practical gifts, surrendered to God, may be used for His glory – both this week, and beyond.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 32 – Acts 8:26-35 ‘Divine appointments’

Last year I read a superb little book called ‘The 10-Second Rule’ by Clare de Graaf. The rule, as the writer describes it, is very simple: *‘Within ten seconds, do the next thing you’re reasonably sure Jesus wants you to do, and you could change a life forever.’*

The point is that (like Simeon in day 20) we all get ‘nudges’ to do certain things. A person to call, a note to write, maybe we see someone while we’re out and feel that we should say hello or offer help. Clare de Graaf encourages us to consider that these might be divine prompts, Spirit-led nudges to live out our faith in lots of small acts of kindness.

We don’t need to be *sure* – as humans, we’ll get it wrong sometimes. But the point is: if the thought that crosses your mind is a good one, if it seeks the other person’s good and wellbeing, then it’s pretty likely that God would smile if we did it, indeed we might even conclude that He put the thought there in the first place.

Ultimately, the underlying theology – and I think it’s a very good way to live – is that *Christian character is shaped less by our big, dramatic decisions than by the cumulative impact of thousands of small acts of simple obedience*. But de Graaf is right to observe that we shouldn’t ‘overthink’ these nudges – which I have to admit is what I do all the time. That’s why he calls it the 10-Second Rule: you’ve got to *act on the impulse quickly*, because if you wait more than ten seconds thinking it over, debating with yourself, the moment will have gone. The person you saw in the street will have walked past, the phone call that flitted through your mind will be replaced by thoughts of what’s for lunch, or whatever.

In today’s reading, Philip got one of these nudges. A random chariot trundled past on the road and the Spirit said to Philip: ‘Go and approach it’ (v29). Philip had to respond quickly: wait a while thinking it over, and the chariot would be gone. Philip – who had learned to trust these nudges – acted immediately (v30), and the result was amazing. Just by ‘coincidence’ the chap in the chariot was reading the best chapter in the whole Old Testament pointing to the sacrificial death of the Messiah, and wanted someone to explain it! The result: a new follower of Jesus, and moreover an influential leader travelling back to another country, taking the message there with him.

Not all of our ‘divine appointments’ will be so spectacular. But let’s not ignore those nudges we get to contact or to bless someone else. They might just be God’s idea... and if we act on them, just like Philip or Clare de Graaf, who knows, we might get to change a life forever.

Why not pray for a ‘nudge’ today... and for grace to act upon it, too!

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 33 – Acts 10:9-20,44-48 ‘Spirit-led rulebreaking’

All human institutions rely on rules to function. It’s just the way of things. Even those things that start as dynamic movements end up needing protocols and procedures, strategies and systems.

It’s no less true in the Church. As soon as any community grows to any size, it needs some sort of organisation to keep going. We saw two days ago how even the ‘model church’ quickly had to improve its structure in order to care for people on a long-term basis.

Beyond these human rules, however, lies something deeper too. God’s people had clear laws which determined the pattern of their life. Although we often characterise God’s law as a series of do’s and don’ts, in reality it was *a whole vision of life* – for individuals, for communities, for lifestyle, for worship.

And two of those rules which any orthodox Jew would observe strictly were: eating certain ‘clean’ foods, and never visiting the home of a non-Jew. Yet, here, in today’s passage, Peter is asked by God to do both of those things. What’s going on? *Does God break his own rules?*

Well, yes and no. Since Jesus’ resurrection we now live in ‘the age of grace’. Jesus himself taught that his new way fulfilled all the food laws (Mark 7:19), and now people of all cultures and races are welcomed into God’s kingdom. But Peter hadn’t yet grasped the full reality of what this meant. It took this extraordinary series of encounters in Acts 10 to change his mind, and open his eyes to the full reality of the glorious new kingdom of Jesus.

And, significantly, it was the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the non-Jewish Cornelius and his friends (v44) which confirmed to Peter that God was doing a new thing. Even in the new age of grace, God disrupted the ‘order of blessing’ which Peter himself had preached just a few chapters earlier in Acts 2:38-39. The Spirit was supposed to come *after* profession of faith in Jesus – here it came early!

So, to answer the question: no, God’s laws weren’t being broken but fulfilled. But yes, God was also disrupting the ‘natural order of things’ to do something new.

And *this is still the way God works*. This story is not a free ticket for a kind of ‘if it feels good, do it’ sort of spirituality. But it does remind us that God’s Spirit is wild like the wind, or like fire. It frequently disrupts our cosy human structures to do something new – for God’s greater glory.

In this unusual season we are feeling something of the effect of that. And like Peter, we may feel uncomfortable. But let’s also pray that, like Peter, we too can see where the Wind is blowing, that God’s creative, disruptive Spirit might birth extraordinary new things in our lives and in our churches today.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 34 – Acts 12:25-13:4 ‘Set apart by the Spirit’

It’s always fascinating watching how people eat a plate of food. You can learn a lot about someone’s personality from how they eat: in particular, when they choose to eat their favourite mouthfuls. Some can’t wait, and have to munch their favourite things first. Others like to space them throughout their meal. When I was younger I always wanted to finish well – I would make sure that at least one of my favourite mouthfuls was set apart till the very end.

To be set apart is to be special. And this idea of being set apart is also an important one for a follower of Jesus. The word ‘holy’ literally means set apart, and God’s people in the New Testament are frequently referred to as *hagioi* or ‘holy ones’ – the ‘set apart ones’. It’s the same word used for ‘saint’ and the great news is that *all* God’s people are saints, because *we are all holy, all set apart*.

How? That’s the work of the Spirit. When the Spirit dwells in us, we are literally cleaned from the inside – the old word would be ‘sanctified’. The Holy Spirit – the clue is in the name – makes whatever the Spirit dwells in holy (i.e. set apart) too.

But there are several different ways we can understand this set-apartness. We are set apart *from* sin and wrongdoing. We are set apart *in* love – for God and each other. We are also set apart *for* stuff. For good works, for worship, and also for specific callings. God has plans for each one of us, and part of the Spirit’s role in our lives is to reveal them.

In today’s passage we see the Spirit set apart Saul and Barnabas for a specific special task (v2). Notice that it was birthed in worship and prayer (v2), and sealed by the laying on of hands (v3) – a sort of commissioning. The church nowadays still practises this for ordained ministry, but sadly restricts such ‘ordinations’ to one particular type of calling. But biblically, there is a strong case that we could be set apart for all kinds of ‘ordinations’, as the Spirit of God directs.

We’ll say more about the gifts of the Spirit in later instalments, but let’s reflect here that *calling is a universal thing for followers of Jesus*. We are *all* called to follow Jesus, and God has prepared in advance good works for each one of us (Ephesians 2:10). The Spirit indwells each Christian, so we are all set apart in one way or another.

You may not feel worthy of any kind of call. But it has often been observed that God does not call the equipped, but equips the called. Even here, the Spirit directs Saul and Barnabas where to go (v4). So a question to ponder today – if the idea of calling might be far wider than you imagined, *where is God calling you?* What is God setting you apart for? There’s an exciting thought....

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 35 – Romans 8:1-6 ‘The Spirit of life’

I don't know if you've ever seen the crown jewels at the Tower of London. It's a long time since I went, but I still recall the sense of wonder at seeing the breathtaking, dazzling display for the first time as a child. One of the highlights is the Queen Mother's Crown. Worn by the current Queen's Mother at her coronation as Queen Consort in 1937, the crown is decorated with no less than 2,800 diamonds! And at its pinnacle (although it is now shown separately), is the greatest diamond of them all – the famous Koh-i-Noor, weighing in at over 100 carats and still the subject of controversy between Britain and India today.

If the bible is the story of the greatest ruler of them all – Jesus – then many consider the book of Romans to be its crown, describing the beauty of the gospel with great depth and clarity. And in this crown, chapter 8 is arguably the Koh-i-Noor – the greatest treasure of them all. If there is one chapter which summarises the heart of all the great truths we hold onto, it is Romans 8.

And what it tells us, put simply, is that God's plan for us is *life*. True life, abundant life, life with God forever. It is a life conferred by the Spirit (v2) – since God is the author and sustainer of life, when His Spirit dwells in us then it cannot help but confer this life on us. We may still have to die a physical death, but our spiritual life is assured.

What does this life look like? In this first of three reflections on this diamond of all diamonds, St Paul gives us three glorious glimpses of what 'the Spirit who gives life' offers us. First, *no condemnation* (v1). Jesus took that on our behalf, that we might be free (v2). In a world currently affected by COVID restrictions, the reality that we live in the light of a greater and deeper, eternal freedom is a wonderful encouragement.

Second, *a new government* (v6). We're not talking here about civil or national government. Rather our minds can now be governed by something other than our own inclinations and desires. This slow adoption of divine government in our lives takes time – a lifetime, for most of us! – but slowly the growing realisation that we live by a new 'rulebook' (the 'law of the Spirit of life'), with a new power source, energises our faith and empowers us to lead lives that were more like the lives we were designed to lead.

And, thirdly, the outcome of this is *peace* (v6). We all face conflicts – with ourselves, mostly, but also with others, with temptations, occasionally within communities. The Spirit of Christ brings peace. Not with all people, all the time – at least, not this side of heaven. But slowly, steadily, our minds, governed by the Spirit, produce lives characterised by peace.

Deep down, we all think that real life ought to be about freedom and peace. The great news is that *this is exactly what Jesus came to bring*. The temptation for most of us is to look for this kind of life in things that can't give it to us. But here, detailed in Romans 8, is the real deal. And may God's Spirit increasingly govern our minds, that we might live today, and this week, in freedom and peace.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 36 – Romans 8:12-18 ‘True heirs’

Early in 2020 ITV showed a new period drama: *Belgravia*. The central character of the story was a young man called Charles Pope. Originally given up by his grandparents to be adopted, through shame that he was (so it was thought) born out of wedlock, it turns out that Charles was in fact the legitimate heir to a noble title. Overnight, his fortunes changed. He woke up one day as an obscure middle class merchant: he went to bed that night as a peer of the realm.

On one level, it's an enjoyable fairy tale. But in Romans 8 our journey to faith is described in the same terms. Through Christ, we become heirs to something even more wonderful: we are adopted as God's children. We might have the same body, the same genes – but *our destiny has changed*. We come to know our divine parent: 'By the Spirit we cry "Father".' (v15) And this is not just something external – somehow at a deep level our spirits join together with God's Spirit, assuring us that we are indeed God's children (v16).

And although this is a lovely picture of intimacy with God, St Paul is at pains to stress that it is more than that too – then as now, children inherit the riches of their parents (or lack of, as may be the case for many of us!). And *God's divine resources, God's inheritance for each of us, is boundless*. It may involve challenges in this life (v17) – but these will pale in comparison with the glory God has planned for us (v18).

This destiny brings with it both rights and responsibilities. The beautiful right to be free from fear (v15) – fear of death, fear of punishment, fear of exclusion: in Christ, we have life, forgiveness and are welcomed into his divine, global family.

But also the responsibility to lead the new life we are called to (v13). As we saw in earlier reflections, we are born again, *new creations*. To lead this kind of life we need to be led by the Spirit (v14) carrying the rights and responsibilities of God's children, his true heirs.

Charles Pope was a fictional character. But your destiny is real. *You* are a child of God. And because you are his child, God has made you an heir – and a new life awaits. We may battle with fear, but it no longer needs to define us. May God grant us grace to be led by the Spirit and live as his courageous, confident children today.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 37 – Romans 8:19-27 ‘Yearning beyond words’

I confess to being someone who builds their life around words. I love to read, to write, to communicate in words. And we live in a content-rich culture. Wherever we go, whatever we see, on billboards in the streets or screens in our homes, there are words, words, words.

But *sometimes there are no words*. Sometimes the enormity of life or particular circumstances render words irrelevant. When Job lost everything - his family, his livelihood, his health, his place in the community – his friends simply sat with him on the ground for seven days (Job 2:13). In fact, the problems started when they chose to open their mouths and try and ‘explain’ what had happened.

Perhaps we too live in a season when words fail us. The great changes around us, the fears we carry for the future or the pain of losing loved ones, mean that we are lost for words. Life is not as it should be.

And that causes us to yearn for something better. For we know that *something better is coming*. We hold onto the promises of God, we trust that one day all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. But not yet. And that sense of waiting, of longing, represents *a deep spiritual desire inside us*. As St. Paul puts it in our passage: we ‘groan inwardly as we wait eagerly’ (v23). We long to see the kingdom come, to see ourselves made fully whole, to see the world made right.

Part of what it means to have the Spirit of God dwelling in us is to feel this. This is not a spiritual failing, but the opposite – proof that the Spirit truly is inside us and helping us to see as Jesus sees, to feel as Jesus feels. It is *God-given and God-directed*. To love is to long. To grow is to groan. The Spirit unites with our spirit to help us give voice to these longings. Not in words, but in a deep yearning for God’s kingdom to come.

And the Spirit is not just here alongside us in this process. The Spirit also articulates these groans in the very throne room of God. Our longing reaches the ears of God through the groans of the Spirit too deep for words (v26). And it doesn’t matter if we don’t have the words, we don’t know exactly what to pray: the Spirit communicates what is needed.

So let us take heart. Life is confusing currently. We may well not know how or what to pray. But God knows, and our yearning will find its way to Him, through the Spirit who dwells in us and intercedes on our behalf. Amen, come Lord Jesus.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 38 – Romans 15:13 ‘Overflowing with hope’

Hope. It’s a tricky word, isn’t it? I must confess I used to be suspicious of it. I found the word too vague, too intangible. I used to see it as little more than wishful thinking, as do many people.

And yet, as I came to see, this is not the view of the New Testament. Hope is a foundational theme, one of the great outcomes of what we believe. You’ll find the word used no less than 53 times, and here is perhaps its greatest moment – hope is connected directly with God himself. St Paul encourages to us to see our Lord as *‘the God of hope’*.

Biblical hope is not just wishful thinking: it is *the confident expectation that things will be better than they are*: that things *will* be put right, made whole, that our future with God is secure. As St Paul wrote these words the church, though spreading rapidly, remained a tiny minority in a pagan culture, had already faced some persecution, and was just a few years away from a much greater and more violent oppression under the Emperor Nero. To the outside world they were fragile and insignificant, and those who chose to follow Christ were likely to be ostracised from their ‘home’ culture.

How they needed hope! And Paul reminds them that they have just such a hope, indeed they worship (and place their trust in) the ‘God of hope’. And *hope is a good parent, because it produces great children: joy and peace*. Knowing that, somehow or other, by the grace of God everything will be alright helps us to take the great challenges of life in our stride, and not be overcome by them: we can find unexpected joy, and the peace ‘that transcends understanding’.

And true hope is infectious. I love the phrase ‘overflow with hope’. A life full of hope ‘spills out’ to those around us. It uplifts people, raises spirits, and speaks beautifully (without words) of the truth of what we believe. Paul calls this deep sense of hope a true work of the Spirit – indeed something that needs the Spirit’s power to be a reality in our lives.

In these challenging days, this verse is a great prayer to pray: not just that we would know this true hope for ourselves, but that we would *overflow with hope*. May our lives spill out into the lives of our families, neighbours and colleagues, as the God of hope fills us today with peace and joy.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 39 – 1 Corinthians 12:4-14 ‘Each gifted to bless others’

I’ve always loved football. Well into my 30s I would play on Wednesday evenings with a group of blokes who were all old enough to know better. We never agreed teams in advance – we would just separate into two teams on the night, depending on who was there. Some nights I would look at the two teams as they lined up and you could tell it was going to be a close game. Other nights, I would look at our team, and theirs, and think, ‘we’re in for a hammering here.’

And occasionally, something beautiful would happen. Despite my worst fears, our team that looked like it should be well beaten suddenly clicked, and we ended up winning the game. Suddenly every player knew their role, we defended together, attacked together, passed to each other, encouraged each other, and also felt that deep joy that comes from knowing that against the odds our team had prevailed, we’d done something that none of us thought we could do when we lined up 50 minutes earlier.

The alchemy of a team is truly a mysterious thing. But when everyone plays their part, it’s amazing.

The life of the Spirit is meant to have the same quality. In this famous passage St Paul talks about some of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit to help us be the church. Literally, they are ‘grace-gifts’ – gifts which reflect the grace of God to us. And what we learn today are three simple things, all of which we can find in verse 7:

First, *they are spiritual gifts*. We all have natural gifts and these can of course be used for God too. But these particular gifts help us to do *God’s* work and see God’s kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. For us to fully live the life of the Spirit – the life we’ve been learning about over the last six or more weeks – we need the gifts of the Spirit.

Second, *they are for everyone*. So often we limit gifts to the upfront people, but in truth there are no first-class and second-class Christians – since we *all* receive the Spirit of Christ, Jesus gives gifts to *each one of us*. Which means you have at least one gift like this that God can use for His glory. *If you don’t know what gift that is yet, why not ask God to reveal it to you?*

Finally, *they are for the common good*. With the possible exception of the gift of angelic languages (usually called ‘tongues’) every one of these gifts – and the others described in Ephesians 4 and Romans 12 – are used to bless others. To encourage them, heal them, empower them, pray for them, give to them or serve them. *We are blessed for blessing*. When we say ‘God bless’ to someone, let’s not forget that sometimes we might be the answer to our greeting.

God’s plan is for each one of us to receive gifts that we can offer to others, for their good and our joy. How might you use such a gift today? And, perhaps, how might God bless you through someone else?

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 40 – 1 Corinthians 14:1-5 ‘Seeking the mind of God’

What do you think of when you hear the word prophet? Perhaps a wizened old seer living hermit-like in a remote place. Perhaps a gold-toothed charlatan with a white suit and flash car. Perhaps a harmless eccentric stockpiling food and waiting for the end of days.

Or perhaps *someone just like us*. The remarkable truth in this gem of a passage is that the indwelling Spirit – given to all believers – allows us intimate access to the mind and heart of God. For some that means the capacity to speak in angelic languages (‘tongues’); for others to perceive what God is up to, and to share that with the community. This is the gift of prophecy.

The word prophet in the Old Testament literally means ‘mouth’ – a prophet heard from God, and was gifted to speak God’s words to the community. Before Christ, this venerable role was only genuinely given to a few godly individuals – many of whose words were captured in the pages of the Old Testament. However, once the Spirit is poured out, St Paul is now able to write that he would like ‘every one of us’ to prophesy (v5). The capacity to know the wisdom of God is now *available to all, through the power of the Spirit*. As Paul says earlier in this book: ‘We have the mind of Christ.’ (2:16)

And Paul particularly commends the spiritual gift of prophecy because it enables people to hear God’s word clearly, and to connect it directly to them. It is for our ‘strengthening, encouraging and comfort’ (v3). Even those who do not share our faith may hear something that causes them to ‘fall down and worship God, exclaiming “God is really among you!”’ (v25)

In my experience people overcomplicate prophecy. We tend to assume it is predictive, and difficult to fathom. But prophecy is really *the capacity to make God’s word or will relevant to a particular person or people at a particular moment*. If you’ve ever read the bible or heard someone speak and thought that it was/they were speaking directly to you, that is prophecy. What you heard or read spoke *directly* to you in that moment. Put another way, it was what God wanted you to hear that day.

This is why prophecy is so valuable – we don’t just know the mind of God in a general sense, *we know what it means for us right now*. It’s the difference between saying ‘God loves everyone’ and ‘God loves me’. Or between ‘we should remember to pray for all people’ and ‘we need to pray for this person facing this issue right now!’

Some people have this gift to an unusual degree and might perhaps call themselves prophets. But the amazing thing about spiritual gifts is that they are also situational. We can all sense God saying something – either to us, or for others. In that sense, *we can all prophesy*.

Why not ask God to reveal something precious to you today? And if what you receive is for you, give thanks! If it’s for someone else – pass it on! It’s all for our strengthening, encouragement and comfort.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 41 – 1 Corinthians 14:26-33 ‘Everything must be done’

When our kids were little, we didn't own a car, so all our journeys were by public transport. With a toddler and a baby, our double buggy was effectively our 'car' – the kids sat or slept side by side, and the buggy also functioned as our 'boot', holding everything on its handles or in the storage space below. Trips to the shops were especially interesting. The trick was to balance the shopping on the handles – too much weight, the buggy tipped backwards; uneven weight on one side, the buggy was hard to push and veered in one direction.

In short, it was *all about balance*. Get the balance right and even a buggy with 2 children and 40 lbs of food shopping could glide (slowly) along the pavement.

Balance matters in church life too. God gives his people a wide range of spiritual gifts for a reason – he mentions some in v26, or you can check out the list again in chapter 12 if you've got time. Sadly churches can often focus on two or three particular (visible) gifts, leading to a lack of balance and the tendency to veer in one direction. St Paul's advice is very simple: '*Everything must be done*' (v26). Every gift contributes something special – not only in enabling the *whole church* to be involved, but in *balancing* the ministry of the church so that it can move forward in love towards God, and the wonderful richness of the kingdom of God can be displayed.

The reason is equally simple: everything must be done 'so that the church may be built up'. In God's community we *all* get to build, we all get to contribute.

The young church in Corinth certainly had its problems. And Paul wrote much of his advice to correct some of the howlers they'd got mixed up in. Sometimes his correctives are taken as a sign that he was trying to put a lid on things. But that's not the case. Paul's passion for the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit is clear, and he concludes his three chapters (12-14) of detailed teaching with this lovely summary: 'everything must be done' – i.e. these gifts are all valuable – 'so that the church may be built up'.

Just as *a fire needs a fireplace* so that its heat and light can be channelled to best effect, so the Spirit's fire needs a fireplace of diversity, shared experience, and humble, loving service to manifest the true glory of the kingdom of God.

Today, we're that fireplace. May God be pleased to blaze his spiritual fire in and through us.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 42 – 1 Corinthians 15:42-49 ‘Final Reality’

How do you imagine heaven? For many of us, it's hard to shake that idea of sitting on a cloud, maybe wearing a halo, quite possibly getting a bit bored.

This is not the bible's view of heaven! The great story of Scripture is that, at the end of time, *heaven and earth come together* – ‘the new heavens and earth’ (Revelation 21:1) – and the whole creation is renewed. It is not empty sky with a few ghosts wandering around – thankfully! Quite the reverse: a beautiful, busy place, restored to the perfection it was always meant to have.

And in this passage St Paul talks about what that means for us. What will we be like in heaven? The good news is that we aren't ghosts! We still have *bodies* – that is the first conclusion of verses 42-44. Professor NT Wright has written extensively on this in scholarly circles, and his compelling conclusion is that this little Greek word ‘soma’ means ‘body’ in the sense that we mean it.

But it's not quite the body we have now. All its imperfections and weaknesses are healed – which for many of us is very good news indeed. Our heavenly body will be glorious, powerful and immortal (vv42-43).

It will also be spiritual. The true goal of our existence is to enjoy spiritual life with God forever. And we will have a body to match that. The indwelling Spirit of God we enjoy in part now as Christians will so infuse us that we will be fully spiritually alive. The life-giving Spirit of Christ will impart that glorious, eternal life to us: hence this extraordinary (and barely known) promise in v48: ‘*as is the heavenly man (i.e. Jesus), so also those who are of heaven (his followers)*’.

I doubt many of us think of ourselves as being ‘of heaven’. But, amazingly, *that is what we are*. And this is what we will become.

As we go through our earthly day today – perhaps feeling decidedly ‘earthly’ – take heart. *You* are of heaven, and the spiritual life you experience in part will one day be yours in all its fullness. That is where we are all heading... and, with this in mind, let's pray in faith for that life-giving Spirit of Christ to fill us again today.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 43 – 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 ‘Ever increasing glory’

When I was a student, I used to earn my money in the long summers working for a builder. Sometimes the work would be nice and easy – glossing outdoor window frames in the sunshine, with factor 15 and the radio on. Other times the work would be much harder. My least favourite job of all was fitting plasterboard ceilings. As the labourer, my job was to hold the board in position above my head while the fitter screwed in the fixings. Even now, I can still remember that feeling of a great weight above my head push, push, pushing down on me, while the muscles in my arms burned. I earned my minimum wage that day!

This idea of a weight pushing down on us is unexpectedly relevant for today’s passage. You’ll have noticed that the key word is ‘glory’, or its variant ‘glorious’ – in Greek, it’s *doxa* and it appears 11 times. But what is glory?

The original Old Testament word which *doxa* copies is ‘*kabod*’ and it literally means ‘weight’. So when we talk about glory, what we mean is literally the ‘weight’ of God falling on us. Obviously, a spiritual being doesn’t weigh anything, but the sense is that when God’s glory appears it feels like a presence pushing down on us, you could say pushing us to our knees in worship and adoration. On many occasions, when the glory of God ‘fell’ (significant word that), people often went further and fell on their faces in awe (e.g. Leviticus 9:23-24, 2 Chronicles 7:1-3). The weight of God has that effect.

In fact, the reference from Leviticus is helpful, as this was the occasion when Moses dedicated the original tabernacle, and Paul here in this passage describes how Moses had to wear a veil in the presence of God. But now – and what amazing news this is! – *because of Christ and His indwelling Spirit, our access to God is no longer veiled*. We can experience His manifest presence directly (v16) and not just occasionally, but on an ongoing basis (v11).

The tangible sense of God’s presence, or by extension anything that points to God’s presence, is how we use the word ‘glory’ now. And this is available to us! No wonder Paul gets excited and indicates the sort of effect this kind of realisation can have on us. It makes us *bold* (v12), we can approach God with confidence, knowing the Spirit of His Son is with us. It brings us *freedom* (v17), as we live with the truth in our hearts and with eternity as our future. And ultimately it *transforms* us (v18) – this ‘weight’ of God does not crush us, but shapes us.

Our task? Contemplation. To give our attention to what the Spirit reveals to us, to seek God’s presence – His glory – day by day. As we do that, we slowly become more and more the people we were made to be (v18) – with ‘ever-increasing glory’!

May God grant us grace to contemplate the Lord’s glory today.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 44 – Galatians 5:16-23 ‘The fruit of the Spirit’

How do you test the value of anything? It's a good question to ask, and nowadays we have lots of clever analytical tools to do just that for almost any type of situation. But Jesus' answer to this question was disarmingly simple: *look at the fruit it produces*. Is it good or bad? Is there lots of it, or not much at all? Does it look good, but taste horrible? Or vice versa? The point is: the fruit tells you what the tree is like. It's a good way of evaluating a project or an investment of time and resources.

It's also a pretty good test of a life – look at the fruit!

In our passage today, St. Paul likens this process of growing in Christlike character to growing fruit. Indeed, he gives what is produced by the work of the Spirit in our hearts and lives a name which surely picks up Jesus' own teaching: the fruit of the Spirit. He, like Jesus, encourages us to focus on the inner life and not external behaviour: get the *heart* right, and the actions will follow. So these kinds of fruit are *attitudes or virtues of character: love, joy, peace, and so on*. If we develop such virtues, we can assume that these fruit will in turn produce Christlike words and actions.

We can also reflect today that using this idea of 'fruit' also suggests some other things to us about the formation of character:

Time Fruit doesn't grow overnight, it takes weeks or months. I love pears: but I get frustrated by having to wait a week or so for those pears we bought at the greengrocers or the supermarket to get really ripe and juicy. They seem to just sit and look at me in the fruit bowl. How long does it take? How hard can it be? Much more so, of course, with the months and years to make any real headway in forming a godly character.

Cultivation Good fruit grows when it is looked after. Followers of Jesus needs their own spiritual fertiliser (bible study and prayer) and pesticide (spiritual disciplines and practices), the methods of cultivation which will produce great fruit.

Fragility Fruit is easily spoiled. Any Christian knows how easy it is for hard-won gains in character to be lost by moments of weakness, or periods of inattention to growth.

Taste Good fruit tastes good! The formation of a truly Christ-like character is one which ought to appeal to others, much as Jesus was constantly surrounded by people drawn by his love and grace.

Single source It is ultimately the fruit – singular – of the Spirit. One tree, one source – the Spirit of Jesus, manifesting his character in different ways. Arguably, Paul also put love first as the greatest of all the virtues, and the one which binds the others together. He said as much elsewhere (Colossians 3:14, 1 Corinthians 13:13).

So the fruit of the Spirit proves to be a lovely metaphor for growing more like Jesus. And a realistic one, too. I'm sure most of us have felt that frustration concerning the time it takes to grow real virtues. But bite into your favourite fruit today and you'll know that it's worth it! May God grant us grace to keep cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in our lives today.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 45 – Galatians 5:25-26 ‘Keeping in step’

On Albert Bridge which crosses the River Thames in Battersea, near where we used to live, you'll find a plaque: 'All troops must break step when marching over this bridge.' The story behind this is that in 1831 the Broughton Suspension Bridge (now in Salford, Manchester) collapsed as a troop of 74 men marched across. Investigations put this down to the effects of mechanical resonance caused by multiple feet landing on the bridge at once. The army subsequently issued an order that troops should always 'break step' when crossing a bridge.

There's something powerful about keeping in step. It might be bad for bridges, but it's good for our spiritual lives. In today's reading, St. Paul gives us this exact advice when it comes to the Holy Spirit: *let's keep in step* (v25). Let's match our strides to what God the Holy Spirit is saying to us, and how He is directing our lives.

It's significant that this simple but immensely important advice comes straight after the famous teaching on the fruit of the Spirit. Let's be honest: it's impossible to grow all nine fruit of the Spirit at once, most of us think we're doing well if we're growing in one or two at any point in time. So this is very wise advice: in effect Paul is saying, *take note of where God is at work in you*, what particular areas of your life are growing or changing – and keep in step. Follow the Spirit's lead. The best thing for any follower of Jesus is to bless what God is already doing. If we do that, we'll never go far wrong.

There's also a secondary implication. To see God at work in our lives brings us great joy. But sometimes we can fall into the trap of giving ourselves too much credit. We see growth, but it brings us pride, not humble thanks. So Paul follows up with a timely reminder not to get either conceited at our own growth, or envious of others' (v26). This was a trap the young church in Galatia was prone to: Paul had already had to warn them in chapter 3 about trying to achieve by their own efforts what is only a work of the Spirit (3:3).

The Christian life is a beautiful blend of the general and the particular. We live by general principles which apply to all of human life, but we also seek the Lord for the particular things where God is most at work at any point in time. Sometimes the Spirit's step speeds up, sometimes it slows down. Maybe sometimes it stands still to direct our gaze at something important. Sometimes the Spirit leads us through lush meadows, at other times through harsh deserts. We step up the mountain and down again into the valley. But the advice is always the same: *keep in step. This is the key to true and abundant life.*

Where is God calling you to 'keep in step' today?

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 46 – Ephesians 1:13-17 ‘The heavenly down-payment’

For many hundreds of years, a wax seal has been used to mark letters of importance. A seal indicates both the sender and the authority attached to the contents of the letter. You may be surprised to learn that the practice is still in use today. When Harry and Meghan got married in 2018 they required a royal ‘Instrument of Consent’. This is the official document giving the Queen’s permission for them to wed. Like all royal documents it was marked with The Great Seal – proof that the Queen had authorised it and given her blessing.

St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians was probably the only letter he wrote which was sent to multiple locations – we have a surviving manuscript addressing the letter to Laodicea as well as to Ephesus. This makes it unique, and incredibly important to biblical theology, since we can reasonably assume that Paul here is condensing two or three decades of church leadership and deep thinking into one profound letter which summarises *The Things You Really Need To Know* as a Christian.

It’s really all about identity – who we are in Christ. When we truly grasp just how much Jesus has done for us, how precious we are to God and what our salvation means, then we are empowered and energised to live the kind of life we were always meant to live. Ephesians is one of those little books to come back to throughout our lives – it will never fail to yield fresh treasures and inspiration.

But here, near the start, Paul addresses a simple, but very important question: *how can we know if we’re part of God’s people?* If we’re forgiven and secure in His love? Chapter 1 sets out many compelling reasons: how God chose us and adopted us into His family, how Jesus set us free through the cross, how God’s grace demonstrates the wisdom of God. But here in this short passage he gives us a very concrete proof: *God has made a down-payment in our lives.* How? The presence of His Holy Spirit in us. The fact that we have the Spirit in our lives is the deposit which ‘guarantees our inheritance’. What we experience now in part is proof that the full reality will be ours eternally.

It is something God promised – as we saw in the early days of these reflections. It is also our ‘seal’. Since a seal denotes the authority of the giver, the *Holy Spirit represents the authority of none other than God Himself* declaring that we are His, that we are saved and chosen and set free to be part of His family forever.

Seals are also unique – they tell us something about the sender. The Holy Spirit in our lives manifests the unique love and power of God. There is nothing like the Spirit – and this seal slowly transforms our lives in a Christlike direction.

No wonder that the first of Paul’s prayers (v17) is to keep asking that we receive more and more of this Spirit. Why not pray that prayer today, and give thanks that you – yes, *you* – are sealed by the Holy Spirit in the love and grace of Christ.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 47 – Ephesians 2:18-22 ‘The new temple’

When St Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians it was still possible to walk around the glorious Second Temple in Jerusalem. Begun by Zerubbabel in 538BC, it was finally completed by Herod the Great (king at the time of Jesus’ birth) more than 500 years later, and its dimensions were vast for a complex of its time. The courtyard was almost 500 feet wide and 150 feet long, and the crowning glory at its heart – the Holy of Holies – was 90 feet high. It was almost a ‘city within a city’ with colonnades, accommodation for priests, libraries and courtrooms and other important areas.

This temple still formed the heart of Jewish worship. It was the place where God dwelt and met with His people. But with the coming of Jesus Christ, all that had changed. Jesus’ death and resurrection made it possible for us to know God in a new and deeper way. The temple curtain had been torn in two, signifying that, through Christ, all humanity had direct access to God. The temple was now Jesus’ own body (John 2:21).

The seal of this radical good news, as we saw yesterday, was the gift of the Spirit. It guarantees our access to God through Jesus (v18). If the ‘temple’ is where God dwells on earth, then *Christians are now that temple, since the Spirit of God dwells in us* (v22). We are the body of Christ – the new temple, the place where God meets with humanity.

But this is not just an individual experience – it is a corporate one too. Christians forming communities become ‘temples’ dedicated to God. Our collective love and friendship, our desire to worship and follow God together rise up to be a ‘holy temple in the Lord’ (v21). Jesus is the cornerstone, but as St Peter says elsewhere, using a lovely image, *we are ‘living stones’* forming part of this temple (1 Peter 2:5) – each joined to the other, each playing our part in the structure.

As we reflect on this amazing truth that our bodies are each a temple, let’s also give thanks for the Church family too, and Christian communities everywhere – little temples where God meets with people. And you are a living stone in that structure! What sort of stone are you? Which stones are you next to? How can you display the presence of God to those looking at our particular temple?

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 48 – Ephesians 3:14-21 ‘Ultimate purpose’

It's easy to over-complicate faith. As we've journeyed through the wonderful presence and work of the Holy Spirit over the last few weeks, we've uncovered some glorious truths. We've seen how the Spirit has been around for eternity, co-existing with the Father and the Son in a beautiful relationship of mutual love. How the Spirit was breathed into us to give us life, and, though the image of God became scarred in humans, how the work of Christ has renewed this breath of God, so that the Spirit dwells in us again.

We've marvelled at the fruit of the Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, the wisdom imparted by the Spirit – and how all this was promised centuries ago, and sealed at Pentecost. Now the work of the Spirit is not limited to a few individuals but freely available to all God's people. Because of Christ, the way to God is clear and we can enjoy spiritual blessings for all eternity.

But what does it all boil down to? St Paul's amazing prayer in today's passage somehow encapsulates all of this glory, all of this wisdom, into a few profound phrases, and one simple request to our great God. What is the power of the Spirit for? Ultimately, that *Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith* (v17). The Spirit always points us to Jesus, and as we offer our weak and limited faith in Christ to God, so the Spirit works in power to seal this faith in our hearts. Jesus dwells with us and we slowly grasp the great depths of that love (v18). Indeed we start to know something that surpasses knowledge (v19) – something so great, so transcendent, and yet implanted in us by the Spirit.

Life can be challenging, and if you're anything like me, we often lack faith to believe in the power of prayer, in the truth that somehow everything will turn out alright. But as we let the Spirit move our hearts, as the love of Christ truly dwells there, warming us, transforming us, so we somehow seize faith to pray what must be one of the great blessings of all history – and may it be our prayer today as well:

'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, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.'

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 49 – Ephesians 4:1-6 ‘The power of one’

The diversity of the worldwide church is extraordinary. Every culture and every society is included. In fact, in every country in the world there is at least one follower of Jesus – and for many, following this path to life comes at great personal cost.

The same is true of our buildings – look around my home town of Milton Keynes and you can see communities of Christians gathering everywhere. Just here in Walton we have churches meeting in every type of building: mediaeval, modern purpose-built worship centres, a number of schools and community centres – even, on occasions, the local pub. Church happens when Christians gather together, and the history of the church proves that this can happen anywhere – in caves, in prisons, in shopping centres and even on rubbish dumps, in the case of one church serving destitute people in Cairo.

But what holds us together? What are the things we can agree on, which represent the glue for this vast diversity of humanity? Here in Ephesians chapter 4, St. Paul gives us the vital clues. To start with, *we all have a common calling*: to ‘live a life worthy of the calling you have received’ (v1). As the first half of the book outlines, we share an identity: chosen children of God, forgiven and freed and brought into God’s family – and this calling stirs us to a grace-filled life of gratitude. A life marked by humility, gentleness, patience and love (v2).

But *we also share common convictions*, a core of truths that bind us together (vv4-6). We worship one God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are part of one Body – the universal and worldwide family of God. We profess one faith in this glorious Trinitarian God, and (almost universally) acknowledge one special way of declaring and signifying our faith: baptism – in water and the Spirit.

This is the power of one – *one hope for the world*, and for ourselves. And it is noteworthy that Paul starts his list with the practical outworkings of our unity: *one body* – one group of people self-identifying and sharing together as followers of Jesus – *filled with one Spirit*: the power of God poured out into all of our hearts so that, as we saw a couple of days ago, we are now little temples where God’s presence dwells.

This current season has wonderfully showcased the multi-faceted creativity of the church – its diversity is displayed in thousands of online services and gatherings, each with its own unique character. And we can join any of them, at any time! But today *let us celebrate what holds us together*, what unites us as one big family of God stretching across the world. I like to picture it as millions of lights scattered across the globe worshipping the one true light of all. May it stir us both to gratitude and to prayer, and to renewed energy and vision to live a life worthy of the glorious calling we have received.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 50 – Ephesians 4:29-5:2 ‘The life of love’

In 2015 a stretch of the newly resurfaced A303 in Wiltshire had to be replaced. The problem was invisible to the naked eye, but fundamental: the resurfacing had used poor quality stone which couldn't withstand the weight of traffic. And so the roadworks began all over again!

In today's passage St Paul continues the building analogy he developed back in chapter 2. If we are now the new 'temple', the place where God dwells, *what sort of stones do we need to build it?* What will ensure a strong and stable structure, somewhere fit for the Lord for the long-term?

What Paul contrasts are the good quality stones versus the bad – those which might not look too different on the surface, but which won't stand the weight of the job.

The good ones are scattered throughout our verses: encouraging talk (v29), kindness and compassion (v32), self-giving love (v2). We can really build others up with these! They are how Jesus lived, and so they form the model for us too – we try to live like this 'just as Christ loved us'. His example becomes ours.

On the other hand, we also get some bad bricks to avoid: dirty talk (v29), bitterness, rage, slander and malice (v31). If we're honest, we'll all feel the temptation towards these from time to time. People let us down, or treat us unfairly and we want to get them back. It's natural – but it's not supernatural. It's not the life God has called us to. In fact, Paul goes further and says that these are things which 'grieve the Holy Spirit' (v30).

It's worth spending a moment unpacking that challenging phrase. The sort of image Paul is conjuring here is not that of a temperamental diva liable to take offence at the slightest of slights. Nor is it the permanently disappointed manager for whom nothing is ever good enough. Rather, it is the loving parent who feels genuine sadness when we let ourselves down – but who never stops loving us, can't wait to forgive us, and who is always quick to see the best in us. In short, *our biggest supporter*.

It reminds us that the Spirit's presence in our lives isn't an impersonal force but a close friend, with deep feelings for us. We are God's dearly-loved children (v1), and God is always cheering us on from the sidelines. It may be that there are some negative feelings which we need to let go of at present – take a moment to offer these back to your biggest supporter. And, positively, may God's unconditional love inspire us today to build our lives – and the lives of others – with life-giving stones.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 51 – Ephesians 5:15-21 ‘Under the influence’

Among the many changes to our lifestyles in this current season, one which probably very few of us have missed is the frequency of trips to the petrol station. The lockdown dramatically reduced our mileage, and suddenly what for many of us was a weekly chore became perhaps every month or even two months. Our cars will always need fuel, we just don't need to fill them as often.

But this is not the case with the spiritual life. Today's passage reminds us that *we need to be filled with the presence, love and power of God as often as possible*. The word 'be filled' in v18 is actually in the 'continuous present' tense (something in the Greek language we don't have in quite the same way in English). It is best translated as 'go on being filled' or 'keep being filled', or even 'be continuously filled'. Our lives need the constant refreshment of God's Spirit to live as followers of Jesus. This, Paul says, is the 'wise' way to live (v15).

And just as a car needs the right fuel, so Paul also encourages us to put the right fuel into our lives. His caution against excessive drinking (note: the issue is drunkenness, not consumption of alcohol per se) is really all about what controls us. We should beware surrendering our bodies to something that leads us to unwise or unhealthy behaviour. As we observed a few weeks ago, the true test of anything is the fruit it produces. Our lives should be under the influence of the Holy Spirit, so we avoid anything else that controls us and leads us in other directions.

But Paul's wisdom doesn't stop there. He actually gives us four ways that we can keep being filled with the Spirit. Verse 18 and 19-21 run together, literally Paul says 'keep being filled, as you....' What? Well, here's four great ways to keep being filled with the Spirit:

Encourage each other, especially in worship.

Make music in your hearts – particularly appropriate in the current season, as singing is banned in church buildings! If you're enjoying online worship, singing your heart out on the sofa at home, there's a good reason for that – we are filled with the Spirit as we make music in our hearts to the Lord.

Gratitude in all things – finding things to praise God for fills us with His love, as we gain His perspective on our lives and recognise that all of life is gift.

Practising humility – this is the curveball. Verse 21 is actually part of the same sentence as verses 18-20, even though most modern bibles put it in the next section. We are filled with the Spirit as we submit to each other. There's a thought! What he means here is not a form of weakness, rather our choice to put others first is a sign of true strength, of security in God's love. We do it 'out of reverence for Christ'. And as we do that, we are filled with the presence of Christ by His Spirit.

So today, let us welcome God's presence again, and be filled with His precious Spirit. And, perhaps, let's draw alongside at least one of these four 'spiritual fuel pumps' to be refuelled with God's love.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 52 – Ephesians 6:10-18 ‘Spiritual armour’

Sometimes, life is a battle. And there’s no harm in admitting that. Generally, we feel less comfortable with the martial metaphors in the bible than we used to be. We prefer the images of building, or growing, or running – and, perhaps, rightly so. These are all positive, life-affirming ways of describing the journey of faith. But they don’t reflect the full picture. Obstacles and opposition are noticeably absent.

As Paul finishes his letter to the young church in Ephesus – and to all of us – a letter which is full of images of building and growing, he reminds his readers of another reality. That following Jesus can be challenging, that there are powers in this world (both natural and spiritual) which are opposed to us. And in these circumstances, *our calling is to stand* – to stand firm (v14), to stand our ground (v13).

But *we do not stand on our own*. We are strong in God’s mighty power, not ours (v10). And God gives us special armour: spiritual armour to wear for the challenging seasons of our lives, the days which feel like a battle. The armour of truth, which, like the Roman belt, holds everything in place and makes us ready for battle. Of righteousness, a godly life which, like a breastplate, guards our heart. Of the good news (gospel) which leads our feet to places where God wants us to be. Of faith, which, like a shield, parries the lies and doubts which weaken our resolve. Of salvation, the ultimate reality which, like a helmet, guards our minds.

All of these items are defensive. Our calling is to stand, and not to attack. But there is one weapon which can be used positively – the sword. It is the ‘sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God’ (v17). Since Jesus has ultimate authority in the universe, his Word and his Spirit are the two things which take the fight to the enemy. They don’t rest on our power, but his.

And we too must use the power of God’s word in our daily battles. God’s truth unmasks the lies that bring us down, and robs them of their power. When we feel useless, God’s word tells us we are loved and special. When we lack hope, God’s word tells us there is always hope. When we think we can’t be forgiven and feel ashamed, God’s word tells us that Christ forgives us completely and sets us free from sin. God’s word is our spiritual sword.

And we can also pray ‘in the Spirit’. This could be a reference to special languages like tongues, but more likely it covers all types of prayers directed by God. As God’s word soaks into our lives, so we are led by the Spirit to pray more and more according to his will. We can do this anytime, anywhere, about anything – amazing!

If life feels like a battle for you today – take heart. The spiritual armour is yours – and God will enable you to stand.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 53 – 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 ‘Unexpected joy’

Good trips are always over too soon, aren't they? A lovely day out, a restful holiday – and suddenly we find it's over... if only it could last just a bit longer! St Paul had a similar experience in Thessalonica. (You can read about it in Acts 17:1-9.) Having just been released from prison in Philippi, Paul and his friends travel on to Thessalonica and have a very fruitful trip sharing their faith. Lots of citizens became followers of Jesus (17:4).

But it didn't last long. They had just 3 weeks before opposition swelled and they were run out of town. Imagine Paul's anxiety at the fate of the new believers he'd left behind. They'd had very little instruction, and possibly a lot of troubles faced them. Would they survive, spiritually or otherwise?

So he writes back to them as soon as he can, and this becomes the letter that we now know as 1 Thessalonians, whose first chapter is our passage for today. Imagine his relief, then, when he gets encouraging reports back from his friend Timothy, who says that the new church is staying strong and keeping going.

But how was this new Christian community birthed in Thessalonica? What prompted such a fruitful response? Paul gives us some clues in verses 4-6. First and foremost, what he has to share is *good news* (v5) – that is what the word 'gospel' means. And it is good to remind ourselves that what we believe is good news! It offers forgiveness, peace, hope, purpose. It tells us the remarkable truth that we are chosen by God (v4), and therefore special to Him.

This series, though, is focused on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, and what we see here is that this message of good news needs more than just good presentation. It also needs the Holy Spirit, at work in two ways (v5). First convicting our hearts – we looked at this in John's gospel a few weeks ago. The message goes beyond just words to something which captures our soul, creates that sense that God is speaking directly to us.

And second, there is real power. This likely refers to demonstrations of God's supernatural activity – whether through acts of healing, or sharing of information which couldn't have been known to the sharer, but which blesses the hearer. I have been privileged to witness some of these occasions when God confirms the message through signs of His presence. It reminds us that *the message is not just true, but real*.

And this sense of a real faith is manifested with one further sign of the Spirit – *unexpected joy* (v6). These new believers faced much opposition, but God in His grace gave them a wonderful gift – joy. May that joy be ours today – whatever our circumstances, however long we've followed Jesus. Why not ask God to fill you again with 'joy given by the Holy Spirit'?

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 54 – 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 ‘Stoking the fire’

I have a confession – I do love a good steam train. There’s something about the ‘golden age of railways’ which captures the hearts of those of us who live in a more functional age. It’s the theatre of it – the noise, the smoke, the beautiful designs of the locomotives. I fully accept that it is not a practical or environmentally friendly way to travel nowadays – but nostalgia isn’t what it used to be, eh?

For all their beauty and romantic appeal, though, fundamental to all of these trains is the basic requirement for a huge amount of coal. Steam trains need fire, and this fire has to be stoked. At least one person is needed to be shovelling the coal on a fairly continuous basis – he or she is called, not unreasonably, The Stoker. Fire needs fuel, and the link to today’s passage is the central phrase found in v19: ‘do not put out the Spirit’s fire’.

As St Paul finishes his short letter to the young church in Thessalonica, he wants to end where he started: as they began their faith ‘with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction... [and] the joy given by the Holy Spirit’ (1:5-6) so he wants *this same spiritual fire to keep burning in their (and our) lives*.

This section is like many of Paul’s closing chapters: vellum was expensive, so letters had to be fitted onto one sheet of paper. As space ran out, he runs through a list of profound instructions at breakneck speed – but they give us some sense of how we keep stoking our spiritual fire.

It starts with joy and gratitude (v16 and v18), bathed in prayer (v17). Again and again, we have noted how gratitude fuels so much of our thriving in faith and life. Gratitude keeps our eyes lifted up to God, rather than down on our circumstances or in on ourselves.

Paul then adds some more overtly practical advice specifically related to things of the Spirit in verses 20-22. We should listen to all messages purportedly from the Lord: not uncritically, but weighing each one. The good ones we should treasure and hang onto, the bad ones we should steer clear of.

There’s always a lot of chatter in the Christian world about what God might be saying, and the internet has unfortunately got a reputation for giving airtime to all kinds of views. It can be easy to be cynical, but Paul cautions us to be neither naive nor dismissive. God’s word is ‘the most precious thing this world affords’, and the more of it we can receive, the better. That’s ultimately always founded in Scripture, but God still speaks today – if not words of biblical authority, words which we would do well to heed.

When King George called for a national day of prayer and fasting in May 1940, the result was a miraculous rescue of hundreds of thousands of stranded soldiers from the beach at Dunkirk. What would have happened if the church had dismissed the king as a crank?

We need the fire, and part of our calling as followers of Jesus is to keep stoking it. Today, let us bathe the day in gratitude, and be ready to weigh whatever we sense the Lord is saying to us.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 55 – 2 Timothy 1:3-8 'A courageous spirit'

God has a role for everyone in His kingdom. It sometimes appears that the people God mostly uses are the 'alpha' characters – the big, out-there extroverts, those with the gift of the gab, the confident, funny ones, the people who naturally take charge. And don't get me wrong, we do need those.

But *God needs everyone else too*. We are all made with unique, God-given personalities. Sometimes those of us who are quieter, or more serious, or like things to be right, or don't like upsetting people, wish we were louder, or more spontaneous, more able to ride the wave of life. But God made us as we are. He doesn't just love us, He actually *likes* us as we are, and wouldn't want us to be any other way.

Timothy has a hard act to follow. He's Paul's closest confidant, and the person being prepared by Paul to shoulder the senior leadership role after Paul is gone. But he's very different to Paul. He's a quiet, gentle character, who leads by wisdom and the example of a godly life. He gets intimidated by aggressive characters and the rough and tumble of pastoral ministry. He's young, too, and wonders if he's up to the job, if he carries the authority to lead people of all generations.

And Paul, in this lovely start to what is probably his last letter, reminds Timothy of the only three things he needs to be the person God has made him to be. First, *a sincere faith* (v5). Timothy has this in abundance: he was blessed to have a mature Christian mother and grandmother, and this heritage of faith will serve Timothy well. Even if we don't have those role models in our past, let's take heart that it's our sincerity of faith that qualifies us to be fit for service in God's kingdom. Real faith is all that God needs to use us.

But if that's the foundation, what kick-starts our Christian service are the other two things. We all have gifts, and Paul encourages Timothy to use his as much as he can (v6). The suspicion is that Timothy's particular gift was dormant, so Paul says 'fan it back into flame'. You've got it, Timothy – go use it! Timothy's gift was obviously supernaturally imparted through Paul's own commissioning prayer, and we reflected on the value of spiritual gifts a couple of weeks ago. But the basic principle here, whether for natural or spiritual gifts is: *use them!* Fan them into flame and let God bless them for His glory.

Finally, we need a bit of courage. Timothy was timid, you get the sense he felt inferior when around other people. But Paul says: the Holy Spirit has much more for you! Your authority, your qualification to serve, is not ultimately given by other humans – it is validated by the Spirit of God, whose presence in you fills you with *love, power and a sound mind* (the other translation of 'self-discipline').

The Spirit is what makes our faith and gifts effective for God. So let us keep fanning our gifts into flame, filled with faith and empowered by the Spirit. God is able to use *you*, today, wherever you are. Take heart!

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 56 – Hebrews 9:11-15 ‘Spiritual cleansing’

I love meat. As it happens, I love fruit, nuts and vegetables too, and will happily live as a vegetarian for half the week. But I can't go the whole hog – pardon the pun. Walk me down the meat aisle of the supermarket, past the speciality sausages and the cuts of beef, and I can't help but be drawn to them.

But like most people today, I don't really appreciate what it takes for me to eat the meat that's on my plate. I don't have to kill the animal myself, to watch its life blood drain away. I suspect if I did, I would feel very differently. Does that make me a hypocrite? Possibly!

As a culture we are now shielded from the true cost of what it means to eat flesh. Animals are 'sacrificed' in special places, far away from where we live, so what we experience is sanitised – an inanimate object packaged in cling film, like most of the other food we eat.

Such a removal of the reality of what it means to use animals in this way makes it much harder for us than it used to be to read the accounts of the Jewish sacrificial system. They feel strange to our ears now, even barbaric. And yet, it's not so very far from how many of us relate to the same sorts of animals today.

And the system had a divine purpose. *The life of the animals was given for ours.* They won our forgiveness, our rightness with God. By their wounds, we are healed. The book of Hebrews takes this starting point and shows over 13 chapters how Jesus fulfilled and completed the whole system, so that it was no longer required. Christ was both a perfect priest (mediator between God and humans) and perfect sacrifice, winning through his one sacrificial death forgiveness and rightness with God for all people, for all time.

Or as this passage puts it: 'he entered the most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, so obtaining eternal redemption' (v12). What needed constant new sacrifices under the old system is now *completed for all time* – this is such a radical change that the author reminds us that this is a new covenant between God and humanity, which guarantees us an eternal inheritance (v15).

But how did this perfect transaction take place? Well, it involves the whole Trinity of God – Jesus offers himself to the Father 'through the eternal Spirit' (v14). *The Spirit effected the offering of Christ to God* – how amazing is that? We rightly praise Jesus for what he did for us, and God the Father for offering his only son, but very rarely do we give the Spirit any credit. And yet, Jesus' sacrifice is offered to God through the Spirit. Wow!

Truthfully I'm not sure I've ever thought about that till today – which reminds us that with God there are always new treasures to find, new truths to inspire us. The Spirit's task is to teach us all things (John 14:26): may God reveal a beautiful new truth to you today that captures your heart and fills you with joy.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 57 – 2 Peter 1:16-21 ‘Spirit-breathed Scriptures’

Inspiration is a curious thing. Any of us who try to communicate creatively in any medium, whether through words or the visual arts, know what that means – and what it costs. Sometimes it just ‘flows’ – at other times, it’s like pulling teeth. We scratch around in the dust, so to speak, looking for a pebble of any shape or colour, just something we can use!

Fortunately when it comes to the good news of our faith, inspiration is much easier to find. In our passage today, St Peter, who had spent a lifetime trying to communicate the good news with everyone he met, takes us back to the things we can rely on. In fact, where he starts is by reminding us that we don’t need clever communication strategies to share our faith (v16). Why?

Well, firstly, *we have the power of experience*. For Peter, that was direct, first-hand eyewitness testimony. He saw God’s majesty at Jesus’ baptism (v17) and also on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured (v18). We might not have that particular experience to draw on, but nevertheless we all have personal stories of how God has been at work in our lives, which in many ways are no less real. Answered prayer, changes in our sense of wellbeing or our character, perhaps one or two miraculous interventions, or even dreams and visions.

These are the things that make our faith real, that give us authority too as ‘witnesses’, sharing what we have ourselves experienced. And these stories and testimonies are powerful. If you haven’t thought about those for a while, why not take a few minutes today? I hope you’ll find, as I do, that it never fails to lift our spirits and encourage our hearts.

Secondly, Peter also reminds us that the truth of the good news is plenty powerful enough in itself not to need ‘dressing up’. He describes it as ‘completely reliable’ and a ‘light in a dark place’ (both v19). But he also points to a deeper power, a greater inspiration. The words of the bible have power not just because they tell great truths, but *because they are inspired by God*. In the lovely phrase at the end of the passage, humans ‘spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit’ (v21). The bible is literally ‘God-breathed’. (For other references to this same truth, see 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 3:7 and 10:15.)

This is yet another beautiful truth about the Spirit isn’t it? Yesterday we saw how the Spirit effected the offering of Jesus’ sacrifice to God. Today, we learn that the Spirit inspired the pages of Scripture. The Spirit’s business is everything that glorifies Jesus.

And we too can open the bible today, rejoicing that as we read God speaks to us, in Spirit-breathed words. What is He saying to you today?

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 58 – 1 John 4:1-6 ‘The greater Spirit’

As I write, it's the weekend of the 2020 British Grand Prix at Silverstone. Once again the two Mercedes cars have dominated qualifying for the race. Many would agree that in Lewis Hamilton Mercedes has the best driver – and one of the greatest drivers of all time. However, what also sets both cars apart over the last few years is that the engine in their car is just more powerful than the engine in other cars. What is in that car – both driver and engine – is greater than what is in the rest.

In today's reading, St John talks about the nature of contested truth in our world. Even in the early decades of the church, what Christians believed was under attack, both within and outside the church. So how can we tell what is true spiritual wisdom? How can we prevail in the spiritual battle? His advice rests on one profound truth: *'The One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world'* (v4).

In other words, it's not a fair fight. Yes, there are competing spiritual forces in the world, and that will sometimes cause turbulence for followers of Jesus. But the Spirit of the Almighty Lord of the Universe is just bigger and better, more loving and powerful, than anything else.

The fact that this divine Presence dwells *in* us is even more significant – we are not just evaluating two external spiritual forces – rather God by His Spirit dwells in us, and no other power can overcome that or take it away from us.

This is a huge encouragement. There are many days we feel weak. There are days we might doubt whether we can cope, or even whether we can hold fast to God. But the greater truth is that *God holds fast to us*, and that His Spirit in us is greater than anything that opposes us.

There is another footnote here. The particular challenge facing the followers of Jesus that John was writing to was those who denied that Jesus was a real, material human being at all (v3). The influence of Greek thought made it popular to believe that Jesus was just a spirit, because a good God simply couldn't lower himself to become flesh and blood.

But nothing could be further from the truth. God came into this 'dirty' world in real flesh and blood form, and in so doing gave it hope. *This same God inhabits our own flesh-and-blood bodies too.* God's solution is not to avoid the mess of this world but to engage with it and to make it whole.

Today, let's give thanks that God is slowly making us whole; that by His grace we can hold fast, because He holds fast to us; and above all, that *'the One who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world.'*

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 59 – Revelation 3:5-6,11-13,21-22 ‘Whoever has ears...’

‘Whoever has ears, let them hear....’ Jesus uses this famous phrase repeatedly in the gospels whenever he tells stories to his listeners. The stories Jesus tells are called parables – which means there’s a point to them, maybe even a sting in the tail. Jesus’ parables tease us, touch us, sometimes torment us. They speak truth in creative ways, but never tell us everything. A brief or superficial engagement with them will yield little. Their true value is only found after real reflection.

Jesus often finishes with this cryptic phrase because he knows it’s not enough just to have the ears physically to receive the message. We need to really *hear* it. In other words, to take it into our hearts and minds, to internalise it and live accordingly.

As St John describes his famous vision of heaven – now written in the Book of Revelation, the last book of the bible – he begins with an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus, now in heavenly glory. The vision is so overwhelming, John falls on his face in terror (1:17): however Jesus helps him to his feet and proceeds to give a series of instructions to various church communities in modern-day Greece and Turkey. We find these in chapters 2 and 3, and Jesus finishes each with the same phrase he uses when he told his parables in the Gospels: ‘Whoever has ears, let them hear....’

Hear what? Well, the focus of these heavenly messages has changed. In the gospels Jesus is mostly encouraging us to step out in faith and follow him. Here in Revelation, he is addressing those already following – in some cases, for a long time – but who are losing heart or losing their way. And Jesus wants them to see themselves *not just as Followers but Overcomers*. Whatever trials they face, he wants them to know: ‘I am still God, and you can still overcome.’

So each word of instruction ends: ‘To the one who overcomes....’ (or in some translations, ‘to the one who is victorious’).

And what follows is a glorious sequence of promises. Just taking those in chapter 3, those of us who stay faithful and overcome will, in heaven: be dressed in new heavenly (pure) clothes (v5); have eternal life (v5); have the promise of God’s constant presence – that’s what it means to be a pillar in the temple, the place where God dwells (v12); will never have to leave God’s presence (v12); and will even sit on God’s throne with Him! (v21)

To the small, suffering communities at the end of the first century, these must have been very great promises indeed. But notice that this is also what the Spirit is saying – the same Spirit who dwells in us too. *We too are Overcomers*. We too have these promises to hold onto. The glorious Lord Jesus cheers us on as well, and gives us hope to keep running our races.

The Spirit’s presence in our lives strengthens us to live in the here and now. But it also transforms us to live for the future, to live forever with God. It’s good to remind ourselves of the eternal glory that awaits us. May these promises give us hope today.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 60 – Revelation 21:10-11,22-27 ‘Our final destination’

It is often said that the joy of travel is not so much about the destination as the journey. And sometimes that's true. We can probably all think of memorable journeys, ones that perhaps even eclipse wherever it was we were heading to. The nature writer J.A. Baker describes his own love of journeying in these evocative words: 'Wandering flushes a glory which fades with arrival.'

But not always. However memorable our journey through life, *our final destination will be incomparably more glorious*. As the bible ends, St John is given a last vision (in the Spirit) of what the 'new heavens and earth', the perfected consummation of all things, will be like. It is breathtakingly beautiful. A city both filled with jewels (21:11,18-21), and astonishingly fertile too, where trees yield fruit every month (22:2).

All the things we needed on earth to point us to God – the temple (v22), the source of light (v23) – are no longer needed because our access to God is immediate and complete. There are no threats to our security or wellbeing either – all nations and leaders are surrendered to God (v24) and the gates can be left open all the time (v25). It is a place of perfect peace and prosperity.

This is what the Spirit of God is preparing us for. Over these last sixty readings we've reflected deeply on how the Spirit is at work in the world and in our lives. Ultimately, the Spirit's job is to glorify Jesus: to point all people in the world to him, and to the salvation, purpose, peace, hope and love that he brings. When we finally overcome this world, and get to heaven, in one sense, the Spirit's work is done. It's noticeable that the Spirit isn't mentioned in this description. But it's not that the Spirit isn't there – God has been Father, Son and Spirit for all eternity. Rather, the Spirit can reign quietly with the Father and the Son, knowing that His eternal task is accomplished. Jesus is fully glorified, and His followers can rejoice and live in His love forever.

This is our final destination, but it has an earthly value, a relevance to us today. Until that day, we are temples of God's Spirit, the place where God's presence dwells in this world. *We are the light of the world, pointing to the true light of Jesus. We bring our small amounts of splendour daily to the feet of Jesus and offer it for His glory.*

May that be our hope, our joy, our purpose this day – and every day, until the completion of all things.

Wildfires

Daily Inspiration on the Holy Spirit – a biblical journey from Genesis to Revelation

Day 61 – Epilogue: Revelation 22:17 ‘The Spirit says “Come!”

And so to the final reference to the Spirit of God in the bible – we got there eventually! And fittingly, *the Spirit’s gaze is directed towards Jesus – as it always is.* The grand story of Scripture causes the Spirit to cry out a final encouragement, the only encouragement in a sense that the Spirit ever gives: ‘Come, Lord Jesus.’

History is his story. Jesus comes into our world, changes it forever, and from that point, the ultimate question is: when will he come again?

In one sense, Jesus is always coming into this world. Every time we pray the Lord’s prayer, we pray, ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done....’ – and we ask Jesus to come into this world a little bit more.

Every time we welcome the Spirit’s presence into our lives, the Spirit of Christ fills our hearts – and Jesus comes into this world a little bit more.

Every time a follower of Jesus offers a small act of kindness in Jesus’ name, feeds the hungry, visits the sick, gives a word of encouragement, mends a relationship, rights a small wrong – Jesus comes into this world a little bit more.

Every time someone prays a simple prayer inviting Jesus into their lives, and asking for help to follow him – Jesus comes into this world a little bit more.

But there will be a day when he comes back for good – good in both senses of the world, that is permanently and to our eternal benefit. This is the day the Spirit is working for, completing Jesus’ work on earth.

But it’s also what we long for too. It’s not just the Spirit that says come – the bride does too. In John’s language ‘the bride’ means us. We are those who long for Jesus’ return. We’ve tasted a little, and know that God is good. But the great feast awaits. And so we work and pray, we live and love, we serve and trust and overcome, that one day Jesus might return and we can enjoy the fullness of his presence forever.

That day may be close, or it may be a long way away. We don’t – and can’t, or even shouldn’t – know. But as dawn follows night, it will come. And it will be worth the wait!

So as we pray, ‘Amen, come Holy Spirit’ into our lives today, so may we also pray, with the Spirit and for our world: ‘Amen, come Lord Jesus.’ For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are His, now and forever. Amen.