

The Holy Spirit

Imagine the frustration of having the very latest digital tv and DVD – on a desert island without any electricity! Well obviously any electrical gadget in your own home is useless if there's a power cut or if they're not plugged in.



It can be just as frustrating trying to force ourselves to live by God's rules, **without the power to do it.**

When it comes to Christian living, *there's no question about the power being available.* After all God is the greatest power source there is. But we're not going to get very far, or do very much that's useful, unless we're tapping that power in our lives.

In other words – we need to get plugged in.

When Jesus came to earth, he fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies about the coming King, including the fact that he was given power by **God's Holy Spirit** for his work on earth. But when Jesus got ready to leave, he began to speak about the Spirit in a very new and unexpected way. He taught that the Spirit was not simply a force **but a person**, who would come to the disciples after he'd returned to his Father.

**Jesus – as a man – could only be in one place at a time.
But the Spirit could be everywhere,
because he would take up residence
in the heart and life of the people of God.**

Jesus spoke about the Spirit as God at work, active in his world. He shows people their sins. He helps people know Jesus as a real person. He teaches us all that we need to know about Christian living. But above all, he gives us the power we need to do the job Jesus has given us.

This power operates in two ways:

- **It extends what Jesus did in his life.**

The Holy Spirit helps us to speak and act for Jesus in a Godless world.

- **It is power for living the kind of life that pleases God.**

In his teaching, Jesus set us standards which are humanly impossible. But he also promised to give us the power we need to put these things into practice. It is at this point that the Christian message is different from any other kind of religion or philosophy.

I will give you a new heart and a new mind. I will take away your stubborn heart of stone and give you an obedient heart. I will put my spirit in you, and I will see to it that you follow my laws and keep all the commands I have given you.

God's promise in Ezekiel

When someone becomes a Christian, Jesus **moves into that person's life by the Holy Spirit** – rather like an owner-occupier moving into a house. And like every home-buyer, he then proceeds to turn that place into his own home. What isn't needed is thrown out – the decay and damage are put right. Everywhere gets redecorated, and sometimes new bits are added. New furniture is moved in – and it becomes a place that the old owners simply wouldn't recognise.

When Jesus moves into our lives he begins a similar sort out. The accumulated junk of years – old ideas and motives, old ambitions and standards – have to go. He deals with those psychological weaknesses and hang-ups which we'd resigned ourselves to, and breaks the habits, faults and sins which we could never do anything about ourselves. In their place he places new desires, new appetites, and a new will to live for him and to please him in what we do.

It's essentially a change on the inside – a kind of *Changing Rooms* type of exercise. What happens on the outside, in terms of what we do or don't do, follows automatically. Christian living is the result of having Christ within us.

St Paul: It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.

Christians believe that there is a living God who is able and willing to enter human personality and change it.

The Spirit – a wind blowing through our lives

Throughout the Bible, God let people to do what they couldn't do naturally by themselves. When he wanted a wise leader, a powerful spokesman or an effective general, he gave the people he chose to do the job special abilities which they did not possess before.

And he did it by his Holy Spirit.

The Hebrew word for 'spirit' also means **wind** – God frequently stirred up a real twister in the lives of people in the Old Testament. Shy, retiring types were turned into bold, brave women and men of God.

Tongue-tied, weak failures became powerful leaders who performed feats beyond their wildest dreams – or nightmares. However, only a few people experienced the Spirit like this. **They were prophets or national leaders** – and it was sometimes only a temporary arrangement. God might take away his gifts if they sinned – which, in a very uncool way – they often did. Although they had God's special strength to do their particular jobs, their own personal lives were far from perfect. It was as though they needed more than this.

The prophets were the ones who pointed the way forward: ***The days would come, when a Spirit filled King would appear among them, and God would give his Spirit to all his people, even those with the lowliest jobs.***

This was great news but there was even more in store.

The real problem with the Old Testament arrangement was that the people knew what was right (God's Law), but they didn't always have the strength to do it. As we all too often discover for ourselves knowing what is right is not enough – knowing the rules often tempts us to break them!

The problem lies in our hearts, and that's what God must change if we are ever to live lives which please him. The prophets of the Old Testament saw this, even if they didn't experience it themselves. This was to be the basis of what was called **the New Testament – a new agreement** between God and mankind, which would come into being when the promised King arrived. By his Spirit, God would write his Law on their hearts one day. He would not only forgive them their sins, he would give them what they needed to stop sinning and to start living for him.

changing

Caterpillar becomes butterfly; sinner becomes saint.

It's the same kind of process. If we co-operate, God is prepared to transform and change us from the grovelling things we were into the things of beauty that he wants us to be. The end he has in mind is nothing less than remaking us in the original design, like himself. And because Jesus was everything a human being should be, it means becoming like him in our character and behaviour. We begin to think like Jesus, and share his concerns. We learn to love like him, serve like him, and act like him.

The Holy Spirit is the person who brings about this change in us.

Some people might think this is all a bit scary – that we get *taken over* and disappear as individuals. But we needn't be frightened. Jesus wants us to be ourselves. We're never more human, never more ourselves, than when we're living out the potential of Christian experience. The change that Jesus wants to bring will take time – a lifetime. Although we have everything we could ever need for living the Christian life in the Holy Spirit, we're such tangled, mixed up people, that it takes years for God to unscramble us and remake us.

But the target is always there before us, even though the job will only be completed when we finally see Jesus face to face. There may be some gigantic steps along the way when we overcome some weakness in our lives, or when we launch out with God in new dimensions of obeying and trusting him. He has so much for us that he thrills and fills us with his Spirit in a variety of ways as we proceed.

But the most experienced Christians have always said that when it comes to proving everything God could do for them, they could never say that they had finally arrived. However far we may have gone, with God there's always more.

the plan

No pilot ever takes off not knowing where he's going, or merely makes up his mind as he goes along. There's a set destination – a flight plan which is worked out beforehand. His job is to keep the plane on course, picking up the beacons, looking for the lights, following his radar and doing what he's told from the control tower.

Equally, a Christian life isn't a haphazard, chance affair which is left to us to work out as we like. One of the greatest discoveries a Christian can ever make is that God has a plan for us. His overall purpose is to change us into his own family likeness, but he's also there in the circumstances of every day. He's got a job for us to do, people he wants us to meet, opportunities for us to take. **Our job is to stay on course,** and we do this by keeping in touch.

That's why prayer is so important, and why reading the Bible for ourselves is part of daily living. In ways like these we get in step with God's mind and will. And because he is God, we also know that nothing can come our way which he hasn't allowed and which he will not give us the strength to cope with. In fact, we can even accept suffering, loss and the negatives life brings because we are sure that he knows best. Like a pilot flying blind who has to trust his instruments, we can have confidence in a Father God who works out everything in his own time.

Although being a Christian is a wonderful and exciting life to live, it doesn't mean that the sky is always blue and the sun always shining. On the contrary, Christians not only get their share of this world's troubles and suffering, but they also run the risk of getting more than their fair share!

The Christian faith is no guarantee against suffering.

In a sense, becoming a Christian is asking for trouble! By taking sides with Jesus, we gain a bitter enemy who is out to seize every opportunity to bring us down if he can. The Devil tempts us, and stirs up opposition in the world. Other people begin to resent someone who lives for God. And so they may well make life unpleasant for Christians, and in some situations that means actual physical suffering, and even death.

When these kind of things come our way, how should we react?

- **The Christian hope lies outside our world** – along with its pleasures and pains. We can look forward to the future when the work God has begun in us will be complete. This doesn't mean that we opt out of this life. God means us to live fully in the here and now. But ultimately we look beyond this life for our hope.
- **The symbol of our faith is a cross**, a symbol of suffering. Jesus told his followers that they should expect similar treatment if they were to follow him. So we share in Christ's sufferings. This also means that we can take our pains and sorrows to God, who fully understands how we feel. He too knows what it is to suffer.
- **Sufferings of various kinds are described in the Bible as a melting pot used to refine gold.** As the temperature rises, all the impurities separate out from the precious metal, and the result is pure, refined gold. God often uses our sufferings - if we're prepared to let him - to refine and purify our Christian lives, strengthening, not weakening, our hold on him and on his promises.
- **The way Christians suffer can also have an effect on other people.** The best many people can make of this troubled world is to put a brave face on things, and stoically resign themselves to whatever comes their way. But Christians believe that God the Father is in control. If we suffer, it is not through blind fate, but because God has called us to go through it. And God will also give us the grace to bear our suffering and turn it into something good.

In the early days of the church, when Christians were being tortured and executed for their faith, the way in which they were prepared to suffer attracted many people to Christ. One early Christian writer, Tertullian, said, **The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.**

Even if we aren't called to suffer quite like that, as the ordinary Christian copes with the sufferings and struggles of life with God, others see the difference.

God's choice – or mine

When we become Christians, we face up to facts about ourselves, we turn from our sins, and we trust in Christ. God lets us in on his tremendous forgiveness and life, and we take it for ourselves. It isn't always that way, of course, because some people react differently. They're angry with God for telling them the truth about their sins; they refuse to listen to the good news and turn their backs on God's gift. So becoming a Christian is my choice. I have to exert my will, and if I turn down what is the only way out of the mess I'm in, I have only myself to answer for the consequences.

Long before we begin to think of God, he is at work in us. Our very unrest and dissatisfaction with life are prompted by the Holy Spirit in order to turn us to Jesus for relief. The Bible teaches that those who believe were actually in God's mind before time began. They chose God, but more importantly, he chose them. They discover that it was part of his plan that they should be in that place at that time hearing about the gospel. They begin to realize that it was God who turned them to himself, giving them the power to choose rightly.

Books have been written on where God's will and ours meet - without really coming to a satisfactory conclusion. We have to admit that it's a mystery – the same sort of mystery involved in being born. Long before the actual birth, the child is being formed. And what is that bright little personality – that new individual – which comes into the world? Is it just a human product, the result of the chance of sex? Or is there more to it than that? In a similar way we may never know until we get to heaven where the human and divine sides of Christian experience meet. What we do know is that it isn't just a matter of human effort and endeavour. God had a vested interest in us before we ever turned to him - and that's a great assurance.

Temptation

Becoming a Christian means becoming a new person. The *old us* doesn't give up the struggle easily though, and that's why a Christian can still sin, why overcoming temptation is often a fight. It's like a tug of war going on inside as old habits and desires start to fight against our new loyalty to Jesus.

How can Christians cope with temptation?

To begin to know this, we must first know what temptation means.

✘ **Temptation isn't sinning.**

We needn't feel guilty just because we're tempted - after all Jesus too went through temptation. It's only when we give in that temptation becomes sin.

✘ **Temptation is tailor-made.**

We are presented with temptations that fit our own particular weaknesses. For some people it will be their pride, for others hoarding wealth, for others criticizing people. We need to know our own weaknesses and be honest about them with God.

✘ **Temptation is a clever mixture of good and evil.**

Not many of us are tempted to do the completely evil things like cold-blooded murder. With most of our temptations we are able to persuade ourselves that 'they aren't really that bad'. But this mixture of good and evil is explosive and can badly injure us.

✘ **Temptation gets us to doubt God.**

Our temptations often insinuate that God is really an old miser who wants to stop us enjoying ourselves. Only by sinning can we get the things we need. This is the Devil's real aim in tempting us. He wants to come between us and God. We need to see temptation for what it really is.

✘ **Temptation's weak point.**

We can fight back against temptation by hitting its weakest point. When Jesus was tempted, he used the Bible to resist the Devil. This doesn't mean the Bible is a magic book that will drive back the Devil, but that by knowing it inside out and living its message for ourselves, we will grow strong in doing good and resisting evil.

✘ **Temptation has been defeated.**

Jesus was tempted but he did not sin. This means that he knows how we feel.

If I have become a Christian, can I go back and become unconverted again? If I've started to run the Christian race, can I drop out and give up? If I've been saved, am I always saved, or can I be lost again? After all, there's a great deal in the Bible about continuing once you've started. The picture of the Christian life as a race is one of the favourites. It reminds us that we've got to co-operate with God. We need to get up and get going. Just as the athlete grimly drives himself forward over the marathon miles, the Christian has to have stamina and keep at it.

Praying, obeying, serving, following, resisting, overcoming are all parts of Christian living.

And yet there's more to it than that. For God has pledged himself to us. He completes what he begins. Just as he drew us to him in the first place, he's not going to sit back while we stumble and fall.

Jesus died to save us, so he's not going to give us up as easily as all that!

We need different *doses of the truth* at different times in our Christian journeys. Sometimes we get lazy and let things slide. The Devil trips us up or we're knocked flying by some sudden misfortune or loss. There are times when we need to be told to get up and get going instead of sitting by the track feeling sorry for ourselves.

There are also other times when the going is tiring, and our strength seems so far away. Those are the times when we're told to look up and remember that the one who saw us through the start will see us across the finishing line. Because when we get there we'll be amazed, not that we persisted with God, but that he persisted with us. We'll admit that it was grace, God's grace freely given, all the way.

being sure

How can I be sure that I am a Christian? Is it possible for me to know it without a doubt? There are a good number of people who hope they are or who guess they might be. The first Christians were in no two minds on the matter. They knew and they had good reasons for their confidence:

✘ Jesus has given us his word

He has promised to forgive and to change those who put their trust in him. We can be completely sure of the promises Jesus makes to us, written in the Bible.

✘ what Jesus did for us is complete

We accept salvation as a gift; we don't have to supplement it with our own efforts. It's not trying - it's trusting.

✘ God's Holy Spirit lives in us

The Holy Spirit leads us into a growing, deepening assurance that we are God's adopted children.

✘ things are different

We can't explain the changes that have come over us in any other way than that God is doing something in our lives.

✘ we belong with other Christians

We begin to find that we feel more at home with other Christians than with those who don't believe - sometimes even members of our own families.

✘ the Bible tells us that God goes on loving us.

In spite of our stumblings and mistakes, and in spite of our changing feelings, God sticks with us. We don't stop being his sons and daughters.

Something for you to do at home

The following passages show us what an important role the Holy Spirit has in our daily lives – look up the references and write what the role of the Spirit is in the space.

John 14 15-31	
Acts 2	
Romans 8 9-14	
Galatians	
Ephesians 1 13-14	