

EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

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God must have a terrific sense of humor. All the while that people created in His image arrogantly deny His existence and the Record of His Creation, they are eating bread that constantly proclaims anew the miracle of creation. Each tiny seed with its embryo and endosperm sustains the very life of God's enemies.

Try to imagine yourself a single seed cast into the darkness of the earth. The soil around you is dry and powdery so that your bed becomes your tomb unless some precious rain from heaven falls. Only then can you awaken to fruit-bearing life.

In pre-scientific ages, people marveled at the mysterious miracle in the seed. The Creation story in Genesis tells four times of the divine miracle in every seed, renewed and extended in uncounted trillions of germinations since day three of Creation. Even to-day, the totality of scientific knowledge is powerless to invent one such life-giving seed.

A favorite theme of Scripture from early times compares seeds to the spoken words of God. "As the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and . . . watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give . . . bread to the eater: so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth" (Isaiah 55:10, 11).

Without moisture in the soil, changes in the permeability of the seed coat and inner layers cannot take place. And when the embryo germinates, the little plant must have rain if its searching roots are to absorb nutrients for growth. The Bible compares the Holy Spirit's action in the Christian life to showers of rain falling on thirsty plants. In other words, even Jesus' brilliant sermons cannot germinate into new life in human hearts without the gift of the Holy Spirit. Mountains of seed sown in a dust bowl would be wasted.

What can really change the hard hearts of men, women, and young people? Only that gift which is just as miraculous as the life imprisoned inside the seed—heaven's Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit, all the preaching in the world is like sowing seeds on a parking lot.

Pure, soft rain is itself a joy that no one can appreciate like one who has lived through California's horrendous dry seasons when the blistered earth cakes up like split tarmac and even the wild animals die of thirst. The searing winds like dry blasts from an oven, the swirling dust storms, the tantalizing sight of dark clouds congregating over nearby mountains, only to dissipate again into the relentless copper days of burning sun. How welcome were those first few drops of rain when finally the agony was over! Then to lie in bed hearing the gentle patter of an all-night rain on the roof of our home was sheer heaven. Famine averted once more!

How does the Holy Spirit provide the moisture to enable seeds of gospel truth to germinate in

hearts? The answer illustrates the uncanny relationship of our human existence to the revealed truths of Scripture.

Although God is the ultimate Source of every blessing we enjoy, He does not simply dole out all good things to us without our cooperation. He provides good earth, sunshine, and rain. But He never excuses the farmer from cooperating with Him. The Scriptures do not teach a doctrine of personal salvation in which the individual has nothing to do. Jesus paid it all, yes, but the new birth is a matter of the human cooperating with the Divine, just as in a physical birth, humans cooperate with the Divine in procreation.

Our hearts are seedbeds into which the inspired words of truth fall; there they can take root and bear fruit. The “fallow ground” of a proud, selfish, world-loving heart must be “broken up” by repentant sorrow for sin and a choice to turn away from it. Weeds of rebellion and worldly cares must be pulled up so that the plant can have room to grow. As in many Californian farms, stones must be patiently dug out of the soil so that roots searching for moisture and nutrients can have unimpeded room.

But even deep plowing in good soil is in vain unless showers moisten it. Water does two essential things: it softens the otherwise impenetrable shell of the seed so the embryo can awaken; and it releases the nutrients in the soil to be assimilated. So does the Holy Spirit release the dormant faculties of the human soul so that the Word can sprout and grow. If you could imagine a

gentle shower of pure, soft rain that could melt a concrete parking lot and transform it into a lovely garden, you would have some idea of what this precious gift from heaven can do for human hearts.

How the Holy Spirit works can best be seen at Pentecost. If Jesus’ story had ended at Calvary, His life would have seemed a virtual failure. All His miracles and teachings would merely offer us an impossible ideal. Even on that last night of His life, His disciples were still arguing among themselves as to “which of them should be accounted the greatest” (Luke 22:24). And even after the Lord’s Supper and the remarkable display of the Saviour’s love in washing their feet and serving them, the disciples were such cowards that at Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion, “all the disciples forsook him, and fled” (Matthew 26:56). After the cross, these “brave” men holed up in an upper room with the door tightly bolted “for fear of the Jews” (John 20:19). If the story had ended there, where would Christianity be today?

Even the disciples, who witnessed the crucifixion, didn’t understand until the resurrection. Then everything came into focus. Christ was “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:4). The most amazing reality of time and eternity had transpired before their eyes, and from then on they were constrained to tell what they had seen and heard with their own eyes and ears of the Word of life (see 1 John 1:1). Their pride, ambition, strife for supremacy, love of the world—all was crucified now with Christ.

This mysterious melting of soul was what the Holy Spirit did, setting the apostles free to cooperate with God. Always, when human souls are freed from the tyranny of self, it is as much a miracle as was Pentecost. Hammers and dynamite may blast rocks into slivers, but you can't grow a garden in gravel chips. Something must melt rock into fertile soil. The Cross, validated by the resurrection, alone can do it. Such has been the true work of conversion through nearly 2,000 years since Pentecost.

Christ died for us two thousand years ago, and stamped our debt "paid." But did He complete His work then, so that now He is on "vacation"? Has He left us to get along as best we can?

The answer of course is No; He has sent the Holy Spirit. We are not like cars with full gas tanks so that we run on our own. We are like a trolley that must keep in contact with the power line or it stops. The Good News is that the power still flows through the line.

A great religious system involving millions of people is based on the assumption that a certain clergyman has been appointed "the vicar of Christ" on earth. The idea is that when Christ went away to heaven, He had to find someone to manage His business on earth. The supposed successors of St. Peter have usurped the honor.

It is correct that Christ needs a "vicar" on earth to carry on His business; but it is not correct to say that a fallible, mortal man can do it. Christ said that His divinely appointed "vicar" is the Holy Spirit Himself: "The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all

things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:16-18, 26).

In the flesh, Christ could not be in all places at the same time, but through the Holy Spirit He abides so closely with every believer that the early disciples who walked and talked with Him could not have been closer than you are.

Alcoholics want to stop drinking but don't know how. Thieves, embezzlers, addicts, and gluttons are terribly ashamed, and wish they knew how never to indulge again. How do we overcome the inner compulsion of evil?

We soon learn that trying to be better or making promises will not help. We are like the sons and daughters of a great king who have been taken slaves in a Roman war of conquest, and are helpless captives longing for release. Sin has alienated us from our best Friend, making us think things about Him that are not true.

Paul goes on to explain that what Christ did for us two thousand years ago the Holy Spirit now does in us: "What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the [Holy] Spirit" (Rom. 8:3, 4).

If you had an enemy constantly trying to kill you, wouldn't you be happy if he were "condemned" in a court of law and locked up? That is what happens to sin, in our flesh. Jesus was sent in the likeness of our "sinful flesh," met temptation as we must meet

it, got under our load, and conquered sin right there within our own flesh or sinful nature. Perhaps we can illustrate.

Suppose a father tells his little child to take a hammer and drive a big nail into a piece of hard wood. The child tries, but fails. The hammer is too heavy, the nail is too big, and the wood is too hard. Where is the weakness? Shall the father throw the hammer away? No, you say, the hammer is all right; the weakness is in the child's flesh.

Now, let the father take the child's arm in his own, grasp the hammer tightly with the child's hand, hold the nail firmly—the nail is easily driven into the wood.

Let the “hammer” be the law of God. Although Paul says “the law is weak,” it is not weak in itself; it is only “weak through the flesh.” Whose? Yours and mine. God solves the problem by sending Jesus “in the likeness of sinful flesh,” and right there “condemning sin in the flesh.” The victory that took place in Him was given to us, and it now is realized in us when we choose to exercise faith in Him.

Long ago, God has already done this for us in Christ; now the Holy Spirit makes it effective in us. He convicts us of the righteousness of Christ (see John 16:8-11). But what is His “righteousness”? It was perfected “in the likeness of sinful flesh.” In His flesh Jesus had a battle as we have. He was “in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). He took our nature upon Himself, “born of the seed of David according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3).

You are never to feel that you are on your own. No temptation can come to you that Christ has not

already conquered “in the flesh,” that is, your flesh. No matter how far into sin you have fallen, Christ's arm is long enough to reach where you are. From now on there is no excuse for any sin. Even this deep alienation from God that we feel, Christ has taken and abolished: “You, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death” (Col. 1:21, 22). The devil will tell you, “That's too much Good News—don't believe it.”

It is to consent to be led by the Holy Spirit. Like the little child who permitted his father to unite his weakness to his strength and drive the nail into the hard wood, so we permit Christ to work “in you what is well pleasing in His sight” (Heb. 13:21).

Someone may say, “Please don't tell me something that isn't really true! This weakness of my flesh that the Bible calls ‘the law of sin and death’ is too strong for me. Is there a ‘life-giving law of the Spirit’ that will really set me free?” Yes, for “the gospel of Christ . . . is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). The angel said of Him, “You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Note, not in their sins. That would be a mockery, like telling a man he is free when chains still bind him.

You have seen the power of lightning, shattering a giant tree and splintering it to slivers. The true gospel of Christ shatters this “law of sin” in us.

“Yes,” someone says, “I have seen how lightning strikes and what it does. But I have never felt this

power strike me! How can I know there is power in the gospel of Christ to break the bonds of sin that have held me?"

"The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions" (Titus 2:11, NIV). When we choose to "walk after the Spirit," to let Him hold us by the hand, His power works within us. And anyone can come to Christ just as he is and let the Holy Spirit hold him by the hand; he does not have to try to make himself better first.

Now look at the power of the cross: "the world" is stricken dead, "crucified," made nothing, even made abhorrent, to us. All the world's allurements are nullified by the greater glory of the cross.

You may say, "How can that be? Everybody loves the world, materialism, money, pleasure!" Paul once loved it, but he discovered something of greater power that delivered him from it. Let us illustrate. A little child has been lost in a big crowd in the city. He can't find his mother. A kind policeman tries to comfort him with soda pop, ice cream, and candy, which the child normally loves. But even if a stranger should give him all the candy in the world, he could not be happy.

Suddenly he sees his mother. He throws away the soda pop and ice cream and comes running to meet the one he loves more than anything else in the world. What the world calls "glory" becomes distasteful in contrast.

Very hungry people sometimes eat leather and sawdust for want of something better. We "eat" sin because we are starved for the true love of God.

Nothing else has such power to draw people. "I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself," said Jesus (John 12:32).

A Scottish girl left the home of her shepherd father and lost herself in the sinful big city. Like some young women in today's big cities, she became a prostitute. Her anguished father waited long for her return. Finally he went to the city and walked up and down its dark streets, sounding his familiar shepherd's call so that his lost daughter would hear. One night while she was in a house of sin, she heard the call of her dear old father outside. With tears in her eyes, she rushed outside to meet him. She could not resist that call of love.

If we do not resist the love of Christ revealed at His cross, we will be drawn to Him. The Holy Spirit will give us the precious gift of repentance, a true heart sorrow for sin itself. God has exalted Christ with "His right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31).

It is only "the goodness of God [that] leads you to repentance" (Rom. 2:4).

This is illustrated in a man who committed crime after crime in an effort to cover up his first mistake. Worst of all, he did nothing to prevent an innocent man from being sent to prison when he himself should have been the one jailed. As so often happens to a criminal, he lost his sense of fairness and kindness, and his wife and children left him. His home was ruined. Yet that hard-hearted man would not repent. He insisted: "I cannot, I will not, I dare not, I must not!"

Finally the innocent man who was wrongfully in prison did an unusual thing. He wrote the hard-hearted man a letter, forgiving him for all the wrong he had done to him. Can you imagine? That letter broke the heart of that evil man and brought him to repentance and confession of his crimes. He said, "All the troubles that came to me failed to bring me to repentance; but when I was forgiven, I repented." Fear can never drive you to be a better person, but realizing that you are forgiven—that does it.

Sometimes sick people need something more than medicine. A man sick of the palsy was one day brought to Jesus. His four friends had to break up the tile roof in order to lay him down at His feet. The sufferer did not ask for anything, not even healing. When Jesus saw him, He recognized that he was suffering from guilt. He said, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee."

Oh, how that poor man's face shone with happiness and peace! Now he was not afraid to die, for the awful burden that had been crushing out his life was lifted. But Jesus took another step. He commanded the sufferer to pick up his bed and walk away (see Mark 2:1-12).

Being "born again" is not a do-it-yourself project. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit . . . The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:6, 8).

One cannot know when or how the Holy Spirit first began to work on his heart. The seed of truth was

sown. It was buried for a time; but finally it sprouted and bore fruit. Now he gladly makes his full surrender to the Lord.

Some call this "sudden conversion." But it follows years of work by the Holy Spirit. We are "born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God" (1 Peter 1:23). When the Holy Spirit prompts you to read the Bible, do it. Accept His invitation to talk with the Lord in prayer. Do it. Cooperate with Him! Take each little step as He leads you by the hand! He is stronger than your sin. Don't wriggle out of His hand.

There must come at last another shower of the Spirit known as the "latter rain." Peter's application of Joel's prophecy to Pentecost is only a partial fulfillment.

The agricultural economy of ancient Israel was dependent on the seasons and climate. The first rains in the autumn were the "early rains," enabling the seed to germinate and grow. But the harvest could never come unless the barley grain should ripen, and a harvest is what farming is all about. In order for the grain to ripen into "the full corn in the ear," the latter rain must fall in the spring. Then, says Jesus, the farmer "immediately . . . putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come" (Mark 4:28, 29).

What does this symbolize? "The harvest is the end of the world" (Matthew 13:39). Not only must Christians be prepared for death, but those who will be alive when Jesus returns in glory as He promised must be prepared to meet Him. This is compared to a harvest. "I looked, and behold a

white cloud, and upon the cloud one sat like unto the Son of man, . . . in his hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out. . . , crying with a loud voice . . . , Thrust in thy sickle, and reap: for the time is come for thee to reap; for the harvest of the earth is ripe” (Revelation 14:14, 15).

The grain ripening for the harvest at the end of the world represents spiritual maturity, growing up into Christ, developing a character of mature faith.

The Bible also uses a wedding as a parallel symbol of Jesus’ return. Christ’s church, His bride, grows to maturity of faith as the result of the last outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit on the earth, the “latter rain” of righteousness. This will mean new truths, new understandings of God’s character. Only those who “hunger and thirst after righteousness” can see and appreciate the latter rain of the Spirit when He comes.

No TV program or movie can offer events as thrilling as God’s plan to prepare men and women to be Christ’s grown-up bride. The righteousness that covers them is a garment given them; they will never claim an iota as their own. At last God will have a mature people who appreciate the sacrifice of the Lamb. All those who will welcome the Son of man coming on the white cloud will have outgrown their self-centered desires for personal rewards. Christ’s bride will never marry Him for a meal ticket. A higher motivation has captured their hearts. “The love of Christ constraineth us” (2 Corinthians 5:14). Theirs will be the bride’s concern for her Husband’s honor and vindication.

According to the scenario we find in Revelation, the latter rain of the Spirit will enable Christ’s followers to finish His commission to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature (see Mark 16:15). As this happens, two harvests will ripen side by side. The true grain will ripen for harvest and so will the grapes of wrath, which symbolize the multitudes that will finally reject Christ and His grace, those who would crucify Him again in the persons of His saints if they could.

Pastor Wurmbrand spent 14 years in a communist jail in Romania. This is part of what he wrote: Let me tell you about a man who was in prison with me. Demitri was a pastor whose backbone had been beaten with a hammer. When certain vertebra was hit, he was paralyzed so that he could only move his neck.

You can imagine what a tragedy this was. If he had been in a home or hospital, he would have had a wife, mother, or nurse to take care of him. How would we take care of him? There was no running water to wash him, no linen to change him. He lay there in his human waste. He could not stretch out his hands to drink a cup of water. The others who could walk and work were taken to slave labor during the day. When they came back in the evening, he had to wait for them to help him drink a cup of water.

He lay like this in prison for a couple of years. It was hell on earth. Then in December 1989, Romania had a revolution and the dictator Ceausescu was overturned. Freedom came and Demitri was released from prison to be with his

family and friends. No doctor could help him, but now he had loving hands to help him. He still could not move hand or foot.

One day someone knocked at his door. It was the Communist who had crippled him. He said, "Sir, don't believe that I have come to ask forgiveness from you. For what I have done, there is no forgiveness, not on earth or in heaven. You are not the only one I have tortured like this. You cannot forgive me; nobody can forgive me. Not even God. My crime is much too great. I have come only to tell you that I am sorry about what I have done. From you I go to hang myself. That is all." He turned to leave.

The paralyzed brother Demitri said to him, "Sir, in all these years I have not been so sorry as I am now, that I cannot move my arms. I would like to stretch them out to you and embrace you. For years I have prayed for you every day. I love you with all my heart. You are forgiven."

Demitri had learned love from Jesus who called Judas "friend," who prayed for those who crucified him, and who accepted Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor, and made him an apostle. God wants to pour out His Spirit here at the end of the world as He did at Pentecost when the gospel began to be preached. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. Why can't it happen now?