

5. The God of Peter is your God

On Fire with the Holy Spirit

Warm-up question: Share a difficulty or obstacle that you once overcame.

Do miracles that happened in the book of Acts still occur today? Some people would say that they don't. With the abundance of evidence to the contrary from all sorts of historical and contemporary sources, my position is that God hasn't changed, He is still doing signs and wonders by His Spirit in our day. In this study we will look at biblical evidence for what God is doing, and tell you a true story that explains why I believe that.

When King Herod captured Peter, in Acts 12, it seemed that it was all over for him. Herod made sure that Peter could not escape by placing four squads with four soldiers in each team to guard him. He was also put in chains (Acts 12:6), but God sent an angel to help him escape. The chains fell off Peter's wrists as the angel told him to get dressed. The 16 soldiers personally guarding Peter did not see the Angel or Peter get up and leave the inner prison, go through gates and past the other soldiers at the entrance, nor did they see the outer gate opening by itself (Acts 12:10). We shouldn't expect miracles like that today for those kinds of things only happened in Bible times—or do they?

I want to tell you about what God is doing in China. The persecution of Christians under the Communist government has been especially harsh in its torture and imprisonment of Christian leaders that have been constant in their preaching of the Gospel. One of the leaders of the work in China, Brother Yun, was a young, half-starved boy from a poor village in Henan province when God began to work in his heart. When his father was dying of cancer, his mother had heard that only Jesus could help him. His mother decided to trust God for her husband's healing, as they had no money for hospital or medicine. Yun's mother turned to the Lord, repented of her sin, and asked for her children to join with her in prayer and the laying on of hands, asking for Christ to heal her husband. God healed Brother Yun's father completely of cancer, which turned brother Yun's life around at the same time.

When he fasted and prayed for a Bible, the Spirit of God spoke to a man in another village, to dig up his hidden bible, and go to Yun's village. God showed the man exactly where Yun lived. God gave Yun a vision of two men appearing at the door with bread for Yun. When two men showed up, whispering through the door for brother Yun, his first Bible was placed in his hands; an answer to prayer which could only have been orchestrated by the Spirit of God. From that day, Yun had all he needed to walk a life of obedience to God. Yun became a thorn in the side of the Communist authorities; thousands upon thousands came to the Lord, with God working remarkably through all kinds of healing and miraculous signs. It was not without pain and suffering, though. Yun spent two terms in prison that lasted many years. When he came out, he went right back preaching.

The authorities tried a third time to stop his ministry by arresting some leaders that were meeting in a house. This was the third time he had been caught. Due to his many escapes from the law, to make sure he never escaped again, one of the soldiers pulled out his baton and struck Yun's legs repeatedly. When he was finished, Yun's legs turned completely black, and there was no feeling

left in them at all, he was totally crippled. Yun was placed in a solitary confinement cell in the Zhenzhou Number One Maximum Security Prison. Day and night he was beaten as the soldiers tried to break his spirit. The Spirit spoke to him in a vision saying that God was going to set him free from his prison. The trouble was that being crippled, he had to be carried everywhere, even to the bathroom. How on earth could he escape in such a condition? I quote from the book about his life written with Paul Hattaway, where, in his cell, God spoke to him from the Scriptures with the words, **"They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you," declares the Lord. 'I will save you from the hands of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the cruel'"** (Jeremiah 15:19-21). I quote what happened then:

"As soon as I read these verses, a powerful vision suddenly came to me even though I was wide awake. I saw my wife, Deling, sitting beside me. She had just been released from prison and was preparing some medicine. She lovingly treated my wounds. I felt greatly encouraged and asked her, "have you been released?" She replied, "Why don't you open the iron door?" Before I could answer, she walked out of the room, and the vision ended. The Lord spoke to me, "This is the hour of your salvation." Immediately I knew this was a vision from the Lord, and that I was meant to try to escape. My solitary cell shared a wall with the cell containing brother Xu (one of the other Christian leaders) and some of the other believers. We had a pre-arranged signal that if any of us were in trouble and needed urgent prayer, we would knock twice on the wall. Brother Xu heard my knock. I called the guard.

He came to my door and asked me what I wanted. I told him, "I need to go to the toilet right now." Because it was brother Xu's job to carry me around, the guard opened his door and ordered him to carry me to the bathroom. Whenever prisoners were allowed outside their cells, an iron gate in the corridor was locked, so there would be no chance of escape. A stairwell leading down to the floors below was on the other side of the gate. We were still completely closed in. The gate opened for people on the outside coming back in, but could not be opened from the inside. An iron gate protected each floor of the prison. Normally two guards were stationed on either side of every gate, so to make it to the prison courtyard I would have to go through three iron gates on three floors and pass six armed guards. Brother Xu came to my door. As soon as he saw me, he commanded me, "you must escape!" He then went back to his cell and collected his toothbrush and towel so the guards would think he was about to use the bathroom.

When Brother Xu returned, he again solemnly ordered me, "Yun, you must escape!" I was dressed only in my underwear, so as quickly as I could, I pulled my trousers up. It was now more than six weeks since my legs had been smashed. Even putting a little weight on them caused tremendous agony. But I believed God had told me in three different ways that I was to try to escape: through his word, through the vision I had received and through Brother Xu. I have learned that when the Lord tells us to do something, there is no time for discussion or rationale, regardless of the situation we face. When we are sure God has told us to act, as I was on this occasion, blind obedience is needed. Not to obey God implies that we are wiser than Him and that we know better how to run our lives than He does. It was just before eight o'clock in the morning of 5

May 1997. To the natural mind, this time of day was the worst possible time to try to escape!

There was so much activity throughout the prison, with all the guards at their posts. I shuffled out of my cell and walked towards the locked iron gate in the hallway. My mind was solely focused on obeying God. I looked straight ahead and prayed beneath my breath with every step I took. A guard who pushed a button when he wanted the gate to open and close sat at the top of the third-floor stairwell. It was impossible to see the other side because the gate was made of iron and the small windows were covered with black cloth. At the exact moment, I reached the gate, another servant of the Lord, Brother Musheng, was returning to his cell and the gate was opened for him. As Musheng passed me, I told him, "Wait! Don't close the gate." I walked through without even breaking my stride! The Lord's timing was perfect! As we passed, Musheng asked in a whisper, "Are you leaving, Brother Yun? Are you not afraid to die?" Then with an astonished look on his face, he returned to his cell.

There had been a guard accompanying Musheng back to his cell, but at the exact moment he opened the gate for Musheng, a telephone rang in an office down the hallway, and the guard turned and ran to answer it. I noticed a broom leaning against the wall in the stairwell. I picked it up and continued walking with it down the stairs to the second floor. An armed guard was positioned at his desk facing the second iron gate. That gate was sometimes left open. Because an on-duty guard was assigned to watch the gate day and night, it wasn't considered a risk to leave it unlocked. At that moment the Holy Spirit spoke to me, "Go now! The God of Peter is your God!" Somehow the Lord seemed to blind that guard. He was staring directly at me, yet his eyes didn't acknowledge my presence at all. I expected him to say something, but he just looked through me as if I was invisible. He didn't say a word. I continued past him and didn't look back. I knew I could be shot in the back at any moment. I continued walking down the stairs, but nobody stopped me, and none of the guards said a word to me!

When I arrived at the main iron gate leading out to the courtyard, I discovered it was already open! This was strange, as it was usually the most secure gate of all. There were normally two guards stationed at the first-floor gate, one on the inside and one on the outside, but for some reason neither of the guards was present, and the gate was open. I discarded the broom I had carried with me from the third floor and walked out into the courtyard. The bright morning light made me wince. I walked past several guards in the yard, but nobody said a word to me. I then strolled through the main gate of the prison, which for some strange reason was also standing ajar. My heart was pounding! I was now standing on the street outside the Zhengzhou Number One Maximum Security Prison! I was told later nobody had ever escaped from that prison before."¹

Brother Yun realized after he had escaped from the prison that God had healed him when he took the first step to survive. He then managed to get a taxi and went to a Christian family's house. Yun found out that their church had been fasting and praying for him and his co-workers for

¹ Paul Hattaway, *The Heavenly Man*, Monarch books, Pages 254-256.

more than a week. The Holy Spirit had spoken to them that God was going to release Yun and that he would make his first stop this family's house.

What do you think would have been Brother Yun's logical reasoning to the Spirit's urging?
Does logic hinder you from hearing the Spirit's prompting?

How Can We Grow in Our Sensitivity to the Holy Spirit?

When Peter, the apostle got to the house of Mary, the mother of John, he found out that many people had gathered and were praying (Acts 12:12). Verse 5 tells us that **"the church was earnestly praying to God for him."**

What do you think their earnest praying looked like? (Acts 12:5; Acts 4:24).

In these verses, we have one of the secrets of moving in the power of the Spirit: faith-impassioned and earnest prayer. Prayers that are sincere and mean a lot to us are prayers that easily reach heaven. These people loved Peter; he was their leader and pastor. There could be no formal glib prayer when their beloved leader was in prison. John Trapp said, "Prayer is the gun we shoot with, fervency is the fire that discharges it, and faith the bullet that pierces the throne of grace."

Sometimes there are situations that you may encounter where you have done all you know to do, and still, there is no change. What do you do then? Let's look at what Jesus encourages us to do in Mark, chapter nine:

¹⁴When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. ¹⁵As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. ¹⁶"What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. ¹⁷A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. ¹⁸Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." ¹⁹"O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." ²⁰So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. ²¹Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. ²²"It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." ²³"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." ²⁴Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" ²⁵When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." ²⁶The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." ²⁷But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. ²⁸After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" ²⁹He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer" (Mark 9:14-29).

If there was a situation like the one mentioned above in your neighborhood, how do you think the authorities would deal with it?

The nine disciples thought that they had it covered without Jesus. The previous passage tells us that He had been up on a mountain with James, John, and Peter. The nine did not have what it took to deliver the man's son from a demon. Matthew in a parallel passage (Matt 17:20) says that their lack of faith was the problem. The translators have taken out verse 21, because not so many old manuscripts have this verse in the text. The verse says, “**this kind does not go out but by prayer and fasting.**” You will usually find it explained at the bottom of the page. I believe that this is the key to answers to difficult situations that are resistant to regular prayer, counseling, and good advice. Prayer and fasting is the key to overcome stubborn problems, not just deliverance from evil spirits. We get power and insight from the Spirit of God as we wait in dependence on Him through prayer with fasting.

There is an increase in the anointing of the Spirit that is given during prayer and fasting, as long as our motives in prayer and fasting are right. Isaiah 58 talks about the right motives in fasting. Notice that the household that brother Yun turned to when he escaped had been praying and fasting. Peter's friends were in prayer, but the passage omits from telling us if they were fasting or not. In the next chapter in Acts, chapter 13:1-3, you see the church fasting and praying, after which the Holy Spirit spoke into their situation with a clear call for them to lay hands on Saul (Paul the apostle) and Barnabas.

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod, the tetrarch) and Saul. 2While they were worshiping the Lord and *fasting*, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3So after they had *fasted and prayed*, they placed their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:1-3, emphasis mine).

The early Church fasted and prayed earnestly. This denial of themselves was the secret to their miraculous power from God and confident faith. When Jesus said: “**this kind can come out only by prayer**” (Mark 9:14-29), He wasn't talking about sending the man and his son away while the disciples took a few days in prayer and fasting. He was saying that if you want to be a person that moves in the power of the Spirit to any degree you will have times where you give yourself to prayer and fasting. When a situation surfaces, a man or woman of God is ready to be led and empowered by the Spirit due to the kind of prayer life they have already been immersed in as opposed to the idea that they suddenly have to take time out to fast and pray. Indeed, if there is time to seek God for a need in your family or work or your life in general, then schedule time for fasting and prayer. Plan the days you will spend in prayer and seeking God. You may want to start by just fasting during one day. It is wise if you drink coffee or tea, to stop drinking the day before your fast so that a headache you may have due to withdrawal from caffeine will not occur on the day of your fast and deter you. Encourage and educate yourself by reading books on fasting and use biblegateway.com to do a search on the word *fasting* and understand the context of how the word is used.

When Jesus heard that the nine could not heal the man's son, why was He so upset? Don't you think that His response was quite strong? (Mark 9:19)

Jesus seemed quite disappointed with His disciples that they could not cast the spirit out of the boy. He cared that they got a hold of moving in the power of the Spirit to deliver, heal and be His representatives with the power of God flowing in them. Jesus seems to show some frustration here. He had been teaching them for nearly three years up to this point, and they were still not getting it. They had His example with them daily. We also have the Spirit of Christ with us, and He has not changed. His desire is for His church, you and me, if you are a Christian, to step out in fresh ways to pray for our friends, to lay hands on the sick and be a blessing to those around us as we are prompted and led by the Spirit.

After the resurrection of Christ, the early disciples understood that more miracles and healing came when they prayed and fasted. They learned from the above lesson and realized that, as leaders, their responsibility was to feed the flock and God and be devoted to prayer. They passed on administration jobs to seven individuals that were put forward by the people (Acts 6:2-4), so that they could give themselves to prayer and to teaching the Word of God. Finally, they had learned to walk in the power of God.

Things that Hinder Us from Moving Under the Spirit's Leading.

What kind of things can hinder the flow of God's power to work in us and through us?

Billy Graham once said, "No alcoholic was ever more in bondage to his habit of drink than many Christians are to their habit of doubting. Many Christians have settled down under their doubts as though they have contracted an incurable disease." As rubber tires stop electricity from grounding, keeping an individual in a car safe in the midst of an electric storm, doubt will hinder the flow of God's power in you and through you. When Jesus taught in his hometown of Nazareth, He could not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith (Matthew 13:58). Matthew recorded that this was the problem of the nine from healing the man's son (Matthew 17:20). Begin to trust God by taking small steps of faith. Pray specific prayers to overcome doubt and unbelief. Seek the Lord daily in prayer and Bible reading to cast out your doubts.

The Blasphemy of the Spirit

The enemy is a liar and the father of it. He whispers in some ears that they have so hardened their hearts against him that they have permanently blasphemed the Spirit, and that now they have incurred the ultimate penalty of living with the unpardonable sin.

The context where Jesus speaks about blasphemy against the Spirit is towards those that had accused Him of driving out demons by the power of Satan (Matthew 12:24). These men were resistant to the work of the Spirit of God in their lives.

³¹And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³²Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of

Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come (Matt 12:31-32).

Billy Graham has this to say about this passage of scripture:

"Perhaps I can venture a definition of what I understand the unpardonable sin to be. It seems to me, negatively, that no one has committed this sin who continues to be under the disturbing, convicting, and drawing power of the Holy Spirit. So long as the Spirit strives with a person, he has not committed the unpardonable sin. But when a person has so resisted that He strives with him no more, then there is an eternal danger. In other words, the unpardonable sin involves the total and irrevocable rejection of Jesus Christ."²

The unpardonable sin is to refuse and resist the Spirit's ministry in convicting us of sin and pointing us to the answer, the finished work of Christ on the cross that we may be forgiven and born again of the Spirit. My experience over the years has taught me that the enemy rarely accuses me or gives me a hard time when I am not walking according to the will and purposes of God. He would instead let me sleep in sin. When I am spiritually asleep, I am no threat to him. When I am advancing in the Kingdom of God and seeking to live a righteous life to help others, Satan comes on strong to accuse me. If anyone feels like the enemy condemns and points the finger at him accusingly, come close to Jesus and cast all your cares on Him. Repent (change your mind about your direction in life) and confess your sin to Him, and utterly forsake it, and the Holy Spirit will come with His power to help you overcome. The Fruit of the Spirit will characterize your life.

Let's look at a passage that shows us clearly the kinds of things that hinder us from walking a life of obedience to the Spirit. The word of God calls it living by the Spirit (v. 16), being led by the Spirit (v. 18) or keeping "in step with the Spirit" (v. 25):

¹⁶So I say, *live by the Spirit*, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸But if you are *led by the Spirit*, you are not under law. ¹⁹The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. ²⁵Since we live by the Spirit, *let us keep in step with the Spirit*. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other (Galatians 5:16-26 Emphasis mine).

At the age of 16, I was in the British army cadets learning how to fire rifles, wondering if I should join the regular army. We learned how to become a fighting unit by marching together on the Parade ground. The front right-hand person in the platoon was always the one to set your

² Billy Graham, *The Holy Spirit*, published by W Publishing Group, a division of Thomas Nelson Inc. Page 154.

marching speed. We had to keep an arm's distance from those in front and to our right and keep in step with him. When we were told to march and fell out of step, we only had to look at the man in front and mimic him.

In the same way we are to keep in step with the Spirit. We cannot see the Spirit, but we are to be sensitive to what pleases Him and do what we sense He is doing or wanting to do in any situation we encounter. The Spirit of God will never do anything contrary to the Word of God, so we are to read His Word and seek to live according to the character and wisdom of God.

Is there a particular time of day or even a place where you seem to struggle against your sinful nature more, what specific strategy can you employ to keep in step with the Spirit?

Here is a picture of the war that goes on day by day; Paul calls it a "conflict" (v. 17). Here's where our choices come into play, and why Paul can command us to be filled (or controlled) by the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). Within all of us, our sinful nature desires gratification. We must overcome and put to death our sinful and selfish impulses, and turn away from a life of pleasing the sinful nature. To the degree we starve that part of our lives is the same degree to which the Spirit is controlling us as we obey His promptings. The fruit of being controlled and filled by the Spirit is love, joy, and peace and the other fruit of the Spirit. We are becoming today what we will be tomorrow. Take daily steps and strategize on how to starve the impulses of the sinful nature. Whatever part of your inner nature you feed is what will grow. The shepherd wants to restore your soul, (your mind, will, and emotions, Psalm 23:3), so that we can more fully come under the direction and control of the Spirit. If we continue to live according to the dictates of our sinful nature, we will grieve the Spirit of God: **"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption"** (Ephesians 4:30). We have been sealed with the Spirit and no longer in bondage to the lower part of our nature. Grieving the Spirit will diminish the Spirit's flow of power in your life, like pouring water on fire: **"Do not put out the Spirit's fire"** (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

Prayer: Lord, I repent of anything that I may have done or continue to do in my life that grieves you. I turn to You and ask that you will give me the power to overcome my sinful nature and live a life controlled and filled by your Spirit, Amen.

Keith Thomas.

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com