

4. In Step With The Spirit

Grace + Holy Spirit = Power

As many of you know, every now and then I lead and teach a tour of Israel going over many of the holy sites in that beautiful land. On the last tour, there were twenty-six of us, so of course, one really needs to be watchful over one's flock to keep them together as we travel. It is so easy for a person to wander off to take a photo and be separated from the group among thousands of other tourists. On our last trip to Israel, I was able to take my son, Simeon, who was twenty-one years of age at the time.

While in the Old City of Jerusalem, we were just preparing to go through the tunnels along the western side of the Temple Mount itself. While we were getting the tickets for the group, without my knowledge, my son had quickly departed to put a written prayer into the cracks of the Western Wall of the Temple Mount, a place sacred to Jewish people, for they believe that the divine presence of God resides at the Wall. He told one of the members of our group what he was doing, but she did not relay the message to me. Consequently, only twenty-five of us went into the tunnels to explore the ruins that go back to the time of King Herod and Jesus. It was single file all the way as we walked the narrow tunnel along the wall. When we got to the North West corner of the Temple Mount, the wall opens up into a bigger area where we looked at an ancient cistern. It was then that the person at the end of the line came through and I discovered that my son was missing.

To lose my son in a foreign city with a different language and culture is a very scary experience. Thankfully, I had spoken to all those with us, that if they ever found themselves lost in the bustling crowds, they were to stop and wait at the place they realized they were separated so that I could come and find them. I told the others that I knew where they were going (I have a close friend that is a registered tour guide that was leading us), and that I would meet them at the next place. I dashed back through the network of tunnels in search of my son. Ten minutes later, I found him waiting at the entrance to the tunnel network. He was really upset with himself that he had wandered away from his father and upset that he caused concern for the group. It was a precious time as we hugged and thanked God that we had found one another. I can't think of anything more horrifying for a parent than losing a child.

Have you ever had one of your children wander off and you couldn't find him or her? Or did you ever get lost as a child? Share the occasion with one another. Share also your feelings about it.

What would it be like to lose God? Mary and Joseph were given the heavy responsibility to take care of the Son of God as He grew up.

⁴¹Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover.

⁴²When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. ⁴³After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, **but they were unaware of it.** ⁴⁴Thinking

he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.” ⁴⁹“Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” ⁵⁰But they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁵¹Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵²And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. (Luke 2:41-52).

Now that Jesus was twelve-years old, He wanted to get on with His Father’s business while at the Passover in Jerusalem. The official Bar Mitzvah of a Jewish person was not settled at the age of 13 until many years later than this, so this Passover might very well have been a coming of age to be a man for Jesus. He was obviously a highly relational young man, for it seems that His parents assumed that, after the Feast was over, He was with others of the huge caravan of people and stuff as they began the three-day walk (80 miles) back to Nazareth. The walks to and from Jerusalem were highly communal and really bonded communities like those in Nazareth. The passage says that they had gone a day’s journey before Joseph and Mary began to wonder where He was. When He didn’t come to the tent that first night, I can imagine that Joseph and Mary were beside themselves with worry. What a responsibility they had been given—to take care of and raise God’s Son! They had lost Him! It took them another day’s journey to get back to Jerusalem. Where would they look for Him? They spent the third day looking wherever they thought He could be. Finally, they found Him in the Temple precincts with the intellectuals or teachers of Israel. He was amazing them by asking them questions that provoked new thoughts on Scripture. Questions are powerful to bring light and change old habits and thought patterns.

Have You Ever Felt that God was Hidden from You?

³If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! (Job 23:3).

Of course, if you are a Christian, the Scripture is clear that He is with us always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:28). What we are talking about here is the intimate presence or the anointing of the Spirit. Many of us that are Christians have experienced times when the presence of God has not chosen to go with us on our journey. Sometimes, we lose His presence due to a wrong turning in our lives. We thought the Lord was with us in our turning, but He had other things in mind. When that happens, it is good to stop and reflect on where you were when you last enjoyed walking with Him, what was it that caused you to lose the sense of His presence?

Of course, it is not always a result of sin that causes us to sense this distance from the Lord. At times, it can be a lesson that the Lord is teaching us. When I came to Christ, my joy flowed over at the closeness of the Holy Spirit. As time went on, though, the feelings dissipated. Evidently, all of my plans were not the Holy Spirit's plans. When you sign up to be a follower of the Lord Jesus, guess what? You are no longer the director of your life. The Lord is the Shepherd, and it is we who are the sheep. We are to follow Him, and He will lead us into good pastures. We don't invite Him to walk along with us. The fullness of life that He offers us is as we walk in His footsteps. This kind of life will not always be easy, but it will be fulfilling, especially when we arrive at our true home. Then, we'll see what God has been building in us and through us. This is not all there is. C.S. Lewis once said,

When I invited Jesus into my life, I thought He was going to put up some wallpaper and hang a few pictures. But He started *knocking out walls* and adding on rooms. I said, "I was expecting a nice cottage." But He said, "I'm making a palace in which to live."

Like Jesus with Joseph and Mary, the Lord had plans that were different to my plans. He wanted to grow me up in the faith and for me not to rely on the feelings of His closeness. I needed to live my life by faith and not by the accompanying feelings of His closeness. I think that each of you reading this are in the same position of learning to lean on Him—even when the feelings are not there. After Jesus was resurrected and revealed Himself to the disciples in the Upper Room, Thomas the disciple wasn't there. When he was told that he had missed out on enjoying Jesus' presence, Thomas decided to stay in unbelief. More than a week later Jesus showed up in the room again: He told Thomas to see and feel for himself the evidence that Christ had indeed conquered the grave:

²⁷Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." ²⁸Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? **Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed**" (John 20:27-29).

Faith in Christ must go beyond sense evidence. Mature disciples have come to a place in their lives where they no longer need the evidence of their senses to trust God. This is the kind of faith that is pleasing to God. The Lord will often hide Himself from us in order to see where our faith lies. On the evening of the first day of the resurrection, the two disciples on the Emmaus road had the Lord Himself explain the Scriptures that He had to die in place of guilty man. As they walked together, His identity was hidden from them until the time when He broke some bread in their presence. As soon as they realized that it was Jesus, He disappeared from their view (Luke 24:30-31). Why didn't He stay and chat more with them after they realized who it was? They (and we) are to know Him not after the flesh but after the Spirit (Romans 8:1). We are to be led by and lean on the Spirit of God. ¹⁵"Truly, You are a God who hides Himself, O God of Israel, Savior!" (Isaiah 45:15).

We want the Lord to come along with us on our plans, but He has plans of His own. His plan is to grow us up to rely on Him apart from our feelings or even our senses. Mary and Joseph did not realize that God had gone in a different direction. We can make assumptions that God is in our plans and actions, when He is not. Samson had a similar assumption. He shared the secret of his supernatural strength with his girlfriend, and Delilah called him on it by having the Philistines cut off the symbol of his consecration to God—his hair (Numbers 6:5). When Delilah woke him, he saw the Philistine enemy and thought that he would easily gain the upper hand: **"I will go out as at other times and shake myself free." But he did not know that the LORD had departed from him"** (Judges 16:20). He assumed that God was still with him when, in actuality, that intimate presence had withdrawn from him. It was author and pastor Dr. A. W. Tozer, who said, "If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95 percent of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference."

I don't know about you, but I have found by experience that, when God is far off, all is not well with me. I get upset and irritated easily, and my patience and peace departs. Like Sampson found, without God's presence upon our lives, we are left to our own devices, our own strengths! We need to walk with God to be effective in our Christian walk. To put it another way, we need to be abiding or remaining (John 15:5-8) with Him to experience fruit in our lives and to be used by the Spirit of God. To walk with Him, we are the ones who must adjust our plans to align with His. Our happiness in this life is not His chief concern. He has so much in store for us than just our happiness will allow. There is strength of character, which is worth more than pure gold in our lives, eternal rewards, and good fruit, light in the midst of the darkness in our lives and the lives of those we touch. All this is worth more than just mere day-to-day happiness, but it is sometimes hard to keep this perspective. That is why we need to stay in fellowship with Him and to abide in His love and grace.

Can you think of a time when, looking back, you took a side turning? Was it your own flesh, your lack of maturity, maybe even a lack of sensitivity to what the Lord wanted for you at the time? Explain. What was it that brought you back?

I have walked with the Lord now since 1977. Over that time, I have felt that the Lord's chief concern is for those that are separated from His love and grace. How do people manage without Jesus? By the grace of God, I have never really walked away, but I have experienced times where I have lost the closeness of His presence. Again and again, when I reflect on how I lost the Lord's presence and what it was that brought me back, I find that it was the grace of God. He wouldn't let me go. He has a plan for my life and yours, and He knows how to discipline those He loves (Hebrews 12:6). **"The way of the transgressor is hard"** (Proverbs 13:15).

We all have different jobs in the kingdom of God, but I had come to a place where I no longer wanted to be a commercial fisherman for a living. I wanted to invest my life in people. I took plenty of wrong turns as I diligently learned the Scriptures. I never thought

in those early days of my Christian walk, that I would be a pastor. I just had to do whatever I could to change the lives of those around me. When I took wrong turns and found the Lord was on a different path to me, the grace of God wooed me back on the path. Conviction came, and with it, mercy and grace from God that melted my heart and restored me.

King David was once in a dark place where he did not sense the Lord's presence. For him, it was a sin that was separating him from the presence of the Lord. He had acted deceptively in an adulterous affair and then tried to cover it up by murdering Bathsheba's husband, Uriah. However, God wouldn't let him get away with it. He writes about his feelings and the effects of his sin upon his physical body in this way:

³When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.
⁴For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. ⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." And you forgave the guilt of my sin (Psalm 32:3-5).

His physical body was experiencing weakness and stress because he was not responding to the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin. Out of his mercy, God sent the prophet Nathan to confront King David on his sin (2 Samuel 12). When we are confronted in our thoughts with something that has brought dishonor to our Lord, we are to get things right on our walk with the Lord. Our adversary, Satan, would try to outwit us with his accusations. He is not called the accuser of the brothers for nothing (Revelation 12:10). When he accuses us, we are to go to the Lord and be quick to get it right before Him and anyone else that we have hurt.

If we ever want to live a life of closeness to the Spirit of God, we will need to be quick to humble ourselves and not make excuses. Our resistance to the Spirit's conviction hinders the ability of the Spirit to lead and guide us in the way; whereas, our humility to receive the correction and convicting work of the Spirit will bring us more grace: **"But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble' "** (James 4:6). Whenever you catch yourself justifying something that the Spirit is showing you to be wrong, know that the enemy is at his work to put you on the road to Nazareth without the close presence of the Lord Jesus.

What danger signs do you see in the lives of believers when they choose to ignore the promptings of the Spirit and walk the opposite way?

How Do I Gain Victory over Self, Sin and Satan?

Paul the apostle in his letter to the church at Rome wanted to help the believers there who had the same difficulties that we each face. To walk in close relationship to the Lord and grow in sensitivity to the promptings of the Spirit, there is something we must know, something we must consider, and something we must present.

1) Something We Must Know

³Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?... ⁶For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin... ⁹For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him (Romans 6:3, 6, 9).

Hosea the prophet said that God's people are destroyed for lack of knowledge (Hosea 4:6). I want to emphasize again that we cannot lose our salvation if we have been truly born again; we are secure in His love (John 10:28). It is possible, though, to be completely ignorant as to how to draw on God's grace and power to overcome sin, self and Satan. We are called to be overcomers. In each letter to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation, to each church the Lord said, "to him who overcomes..." (Revelation 2-3). We need the tools of God to overcome with the Word of God being our chief weapon—the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17).

Do you really know and believe what Christ accomplished for you when He died and rose again? This is paramount to living a life in tune with the Spirit and empowered for ministry. If you are not firm in this knowledge, the enemy will easily condemn you and rob you of the authority you have in Christ. Jesus tasted death for us and was raised to newness of life. When Scripture states that we are baptized into his death, this is a spiritual transformation that has taken place in the heavenly realms. The word baptism comes from the Greek word *baptizo*, which speaks of identification. It was a term used for dying cloth. When the cloth was dipped, it was transformed. We too are transformed by this baptism. Christ's victory over sin was our victory. You may not feel victorious, but by faith, regardless of your feelings, you need to understand what Christ accomplished for you and know that He obtained this victory for you to walk in, not just to mentally comprehend, but also to live in the power of this truth.

2) Something We Must Consider or Count on

¹¹In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus

¹²Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires (Romans 6:11-12).

The word "consider or count," depending on your English translation, is an accounting term, and it means to calculate or count on. When I found out my son was lost, I counted on the fact that I knew he would wait there for me. I didn't look anywhere else for him, I relied on the young man of character that he is, that he would be obedient to what I had told him. To count yourself dead is a very deliberate phrase used here. What are we to count on? That we are dead to sin's mastery over us. We are slaves to sin no longer, since we have been bought with a price, the precious redeeming blood of Christ.

After a person becomes a Christian, there is still a battle that he or she goes through. There is an inner war between our lower nature, that which the Bible calls the flesh, and

between the renewed inner nature of our spirit that now puts Christ and His Word first. The more you obey the dictates of the Holy Spirit, the more you will put to death the pandering of your lower nature. The spiritual truth of the scripture above is that God has called us to live an empowered life in step with the Spirit. ²⁵**“If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25 NIV).** The ESV translation puts the same scripture in terms of keeping in step with the Spirit: **“If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.”** The picture is of an army marching or fighting in unison together. To maintain rank, each person needs to keep in step to the man on the right, and each man on the right keeps in step with the one in front to the right. In that way, the whole regiment marches or fights without breaking ranks. We are to be in unison with the Holy Spirit, to say yes to the inner thoughts from Him that agrees to the Word of God. He will remind us and bring to our remembrance what the Lord Jesus has spoken. In this way, His power will flow through the body of Christ as we maintain the unity of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:3). We no longer give obedience to our fleshly dictates.

3) Something We Must Present

¹³and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. ¹⁴For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace (Romans 6:13-14).

Paul here is speaking of a very conscious effort when he says what we are to do, and what we are not to do in order to live an empowered life in the Spirit. We are not to present our body as an instrument of unrighteousness, but to present ourselves to God.

Think about these words in Romans 6:13: “Present yourselves to God...” What does this mean in practical terms?

Our mind is the battlefield where the enemy meets us. It is there that he chooses first to wage his war, and it is there that we need to be ready for him. We present to God all we are, our mind, our will, our emotions, and our physical being. However, it is in the mind first that the battle is won or lost. Everything else will be affected by what we allow our minds to dwell on and the choices that we make. That is why we are first to know, then to consider, and then to present. When we are obedient to the Spirit, God can use His people in a powerful way.

Carl Lawrence related one of the most remarkable stories of how God is using humble, simple-hearted Christians to build His kingdom on Hainan Island. I quote from his book *The Coming Influence of China*. Lawrence recounts how, in the mid-1990s, two young women came to faith in Christ in another Chinese province after hearing the Gospel via shortwave radio broadcasts. The two new believers received Bibles and immediately wanted to serve God with all their hearts. A Hong Kong-based pastor met with the two and tried to teach them that they should remain where they were and minister to their neighbors. The girls protested, “No! The Bible you gave us says Jesus told us to go into all the world. We want to go.” Finally the pastor, feeling ashamed at his own comparative

lack of zeal, relented and told the girls there was a need for workers on Hainan Island. The duo had never heard of Hainan Island before, but they were certain God wanted them to preach the Gospel there.

Two years later, the girls returned to the Chinese mainland where the pastor met with them. He had not heard any news since their departure. The Hong Kong pastor used the meeting to introduce the girls to several visiting Western church leaders. After introductions, the girls were asked how their work had been and whether or not they had been able to start any churches. Lawrence explains: “The women put their heads down and answered, ‘Oh pastor, we have only been there two years...yea, two years. Not many. Not very many.’ Their voices were apologetic. ‘We have only been there a short time. The people were not very friendly, no, not very friendly. Sometimes, they became very vicious. Yes, sometimes they told us they were going to drown us in the ocean. Several men threatened us. Oh my, and because we were so young, even some of the ladies did not like us. Yes, some even called us terrible names...so not many churches...no, not many.’” Finally, after being asked again by the frustrated pastor, the girls apologized that they had been only able to start 30 churches since their arrival on Hainan Island!

The pastor and his Western friends were taken aback by the news. They asked how many people attended their new churches. After again going through a process of apologies and self-effacing comments, they answered, “Two hundred and twenty.” The listeners presumed that meant the girls had won a total of 220 converts in their 30 churches, but 220 was the number of members in the smallest of their churches! “How many people do you have in the largest of your churches,” the pastor demanded to know. “Oh...not many...Less than five thousand. Only four thousand nine hundred. Yes, less than five thousand. We have just started.”

The Western visitors were so touched by the humility and zeal of the two young ladies that they began to weep. One of the visitors told the pastor to ask the two ladies how they managed to achieve such great results. “What did we do? Why nothing. Yes, we did nothing, nothing.” The amazed onlookers protested, “You did nothing? You have thirty churches – the smallest with two hundred and twenty people, the largest with almost five thousand new Christians! And you did nothing?” The two evangelists simply said, “We just prayed.... After we prayed, the Holy Spirit would tell us exactly what to do. We would keep praying and He would tell us what to do, we would then do it. Then, we would pray again and he would tell us what to do again.

Note: When we first read this story of the two faithful girls, we were not sure of the story’s accuracy, as it almost sounded too good to be true. We sent the story to a friend who is an expert on the church in Hainan Island. Somewhat surprisingly, our informant responded that indeed the story is true. These two young women had done great exploits and planted many churches in the face of great opposition and struggle. They primarily worked in southern Hainan Island, including several counties around Sanya City. However, our friend also added that because of a lack of follow up and discipleship, that

much of the fruit had been lost to cults, and that by 1999 perhaps “only” 5,000 of the duo’s converts remained true believers.¹

Prayer: Father, would you teach us how to keep in step with Your Spirit and serve You humbly and faithfully. Thank You for what You are doing all over the world to reach those that are hungry for relationship with You. Help us to do our part to disciple those in other parts of the world that have no teachers of the Word of God. Amen!

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¹ Taken from the website of Asia Harvest: <http://asiaharvest.org/testimonies/#13>