

## **DISCIPLESHIP THROUGH RELATIONSHIP` “MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD”**

### **B. Knowing the Holy Spirit and His Power**

#### *A Moment in the Life of a Disciple (4)*

You are well established on the path to discipleship. Starting out is usually easy. The uncertainty can be exciting and provide a fillip when difficulties and doubts start to undermine your resolve. But the world is full of “starters”; people who begin with great intentions and purpose, but give up without seeing anything through to a conclusion. Deciding to become a disciple of Jesus is not necessarily a mark of spirituality, nor even of commitment, performance or growth. It can be prompted by a spark of curiosity, peer pressure, or personal crisis. It is easy to give up – and many do so. You will eventually learn that one of Jesus most trusted followers, a man who had a clear and recognized part in His public ministry, who saw miracles galore and put up with the opprobrium of the religious leaders and stuck with Jesus through thick and thin for several years, didn’t have what it took, but betrayed him in the end for the sake of expediency. Others, like Peter (of the “ready-fire-aim” personality), have rashly declared that they will follow Him anywhere, even to the gates of suffering and death. That boast will prove to be hollow. In the end, all but one of the Inner Circle will scatter when opposition to Jesus reaches its peak. So much for promises and “life-long learning”. It seems it is going to be harder than you first thought to be a “constant” disciple. If the best and the brightest are not yet prepared to accept the challenge to “take up their cross and follow Jesus”, there has to be another way. To tell the truth, there is something “deeper”: in Jesus than you have been able to work out. As you pay close attention and seek to make sense of His private life and public ministry, you are conscious of an underlying “power” that is not man-made – and not present in others. He talks about the “Holy Spirit” and promises power to those who remain true to the call. The most you know about the Holy Spirit goes back hundreds of years to the early Kingdom of Israel. The records state that King David had a personal experience with the Holy Spirit and was fearful of losing that relationship more than anything else after being caught committing adultery and ordering the death of one of his most able soldiers. There were a few others back then, but what has that got to do with your generation. Your life is pretty ordinary compared with Israel’s heroes. The other disciples include unschooled fishermen and a tax collector. One day, Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit coming in His place; He will be available to all who ask and obey God’s will. The key to keeping on track then, as a disciple, is going to be receiving and knowing God’s Spirit. That doesn’t make sense. You can’t see Him. It all seems too subjective. But wouldn’t it be great to be a follower with access to the kind of power that Jesus had?!

Jesus operated in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. We are likewise “temples” of God in the marketplace. The test of discipleship is whether we have a personal relationship with Him and make lifestyle decisions on that basis.

### *Jesus and the Holy Spirit*

Jesus operated with an unmistakable “power” ministry. He was different from everyone else. The way He taught made him both close friends and bitter enemies. The religious leaders had to recognize (albeit grudgingly) that what He said made sense to men and women in the street. He spoke to peoples’ hearts and they responded. That provoked deep jealousies, as it undermined their authority. Jesus broke social taboos. He ignored petty man-made laws the prevailing system had added to the original Law of Moses. He had charismatic power over crowds, demons and nature itself that disturbed a lot of people. He had a “presence” that made hypocrites feel guilty and remorseful people feel the power of divine forgiveness. He spoke God’s forgiveness to people; of itself a direct challenge to the legalistic priestly regime. He didn’t go around shouting, demanding attention. The supernatural spoke for itself. He didn’t raise His voice in the street, as sophists and other rhetoricians did. Nevertheless, He had “something” unique. For that reason, people flocked to see Him wherever He went (Matthew 4:23-25; 7:28, 29).

The key to Jesus’ ministry was His relationship with the Holy Spirit, who first came down on Him in the form of a dove at His baptism. Mark tells the story:

*“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:9-11)*

A Jordanian official once gave me a bottle of “holy water” from the Jordan River, “where Jesus was baptized”. On the side of the box there is a simple sketch depicting the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus as He came up out of the water. This was the launch point. Jesus’ entire ministry would be imbued with supernatural power.

But just imagine if it all stopped there, if Jesus relied on a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The religious leaders of His day were accustomed to living in the past, lionizing heroes now dead, holding tenaciously to mores that were designed for cultures long since consigned to history. I have encountered lots of Christians whose greatest experiences with God lay in a church service or prayer meeting “back there”. This implies that their experience with the Holy Spirit was event-based, not continuous. Discipleship does not work this way. It is ongoing.

For Jesus, God was the “God of the living” (Mark 12:27) and the Holy Spirit was “for now”. He said, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me” (Luke 4:18). Luke records that Jesus went about doing good and healing all those who were being oppressed by the devil, because He lived in an “anointing of the Holy Spirit and power.” (Acts 10:38). Did you know that Jesus’ title “Messiah” (“Christ” in Greek) means anointed.

What does this mean in practice?

### *Who is the Holy Spirit?*

Many Christians do not understand the Person or ministry of the Holy Spirit. What does the Bible teach?

The Holy Spirit is God. He has a personality. He is not a “force”, or an “influence” as some sects believe. One group defines Him (or “it”), as a “divine liquid”. Imagine your best friend describing you using such figures of speech.

The Holy Spirit has personal traits. He speaks (Acts 13:2). He listens. He guides us. He intercedes. We can’t get away from Him. He can be insulted and grieved (Ephesians 4:30). He is known as the Spirit of Jesus. When we grasp truth it is because He has imparted understanding to us. When Jesus is lifted up in our lives it is a result of the Spirit’s work. We have nothing without His revelation. Every disciple needs this kind of relationship.

The Holy Spirit teaches us (Luke 12:12; John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:13) and transforms us into Jesus’ likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18).

In the Old Testament the Holy Spirit was given to select people for specific tasks. He came upon seventy Elders assisting Moses in the wilderness and individuals such as Samson and Gideon, moving, guiding and corrected them, giving ordinary men and women extraordinary skills for set tasks and power to be God’s servants. For the most part, His activities were localized and particular.

The coming of Jesus changed all that.

*“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. (John 14:16, 17)*

The word translated “Counsellor” comes from “parakletos”, meaning someone who comes alongside another, to guide and assist them. The Holy Spirit’s role is to come alongside believers, to live in us and equip us to live effectively as disciples and do what Jesus did when he was in the world.

### *The early church and the Holy Spirit*

Fifty days after the ascension of Jesus (His parting words were that He would send the Holy Spirit; if they waited till the appointed time they would receive the promise; see Acts 1:8) the Spirit came down and filled the disciples and the first church was born. As disciples of Jesus, we also need an ongoing relationship with the Holy Spirit. Think about how He transformed Paul’s life. Let me explain.

I once had a job that frequently took me to the Syrian capital, Damascus, the world’s oldest continuously inhabited city and home of the Umayyad Empire of Islam, which extended from Spain to India during the period 661-750. The old city centre is filled with mosques and churches and has a fascinating history.

On the Christian side of Damascus, past Straight Street and Bab Touma (Thomas Gate), is a functioning monastery with an elaborate shrine at the rear. According to local tradition, this is the spot where the enforcer of Judaism, Saul of Tarsus, had a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ. Filled with Holy Spirit a few days after that event (what passes for the house of Ananias is a popular tourist spot for Christians), his ministry was launched and he was instrumental in planting churches over much of the then-known world (cf Acts 13:1-4; 16:6-10). Paul's ministry had a global impact because he had a relationship with the Holy Spirit. So can you and I.

In church services we often sing words such as "Come Holy Spirit"; however, that concept stems from a misunderstanding. The same school that insists we go "to" defined places to meet with God stresses that it is there that we "meet" the Spirit of God. "Welcome Holy Spirit" is a common refrain; "Lord, come down and dwell among us". Wait a minute! These expressions sound "spiritual", but they are inexact and misleading, from a Biblical perspective. When we gather He is already there, among us.

We all need the encouragement and impetus of corporate Christian life – as we hang out and worship God together we are challenged, stretched, corrected, built up, taught and incentivated. The gifts and ministry of the Spirit are more completely manifest and inter-relational in corporate church life, when we are "tuned in" with other Christians (cf Ephesians 5:19-20). However, "place" alone does not define or prescribe relationship. We don't cease to be the "temple" of the Holy Spirit the moment we exit the sanctuary (1 Corinthians 6:19, 2 Timothy 1:14).

It might be more appropriate to start each day praying, "Holy Spirit, you are God. You have to come to be with me, to live inside of me, to give me power to live. Teach me, guide me, strengthen me, correct me, do what you want to make me more like Jesus. Help me to be obedient to you and make lifestyle choices that please you. Help me to be continually filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:19 – the conjugation of the original Greek text is present-continuous, like "be being filled").

Discipleship involves connection with the Holy Spirit, who shows us the path of effective followership and reveals what Jesus is like in practical terms. Imagine trying to have a relationship with your wife or children by reading descriptions and hearing stories about them. Who wants a second-hand experience, a proxy marriage? The Holy Spirit wants us relationship with you and I that is first-hand.

Let's now position ourselves in the marketplace, in the office, school or factory floor. When you and I operate there, we do so as the dwelling places of the Holy Spirit. He is just as close as when we worship in Christian community, irrespective of how we feel. That means I can sit in the car, at my desk or in meetings and quietly ask Him for ideas, answers, favour, guidance, clarity and discernment about what is going on and hand over my burdens at the same time, rolling them onto His shoulders. That doesn't come automatically, but if we are in relationship with the Holy Spirit we will be able to hear as He prompts, rebukes, guides and strengthens us to do what is right.

### *The role of the Holy Spirit in active discipleship*

The Spirit of God is a constant companion in the life of the child of God. “He” (the Bible uses the pronoun):

- calls us to follow Jesus
- convicts us of sin, things that are in our lives that are not pleasing to God
- gives us insight into the life of Christ
- reveals the character of Jesus to our spirit – we all need understanding
- speaks to us and helps us make decisions in line with God’s will
- corrects us when we stray from the path
- teaches us the meaning of what we go through
- tutors us in God’s Word and helps us to apply it to our circumstances
- empowers us, in spite of our limitations (Ephesians 3:14-21)
- renews our mind
- keeps our focus on Jesus (John 16:13-15)
- gives gifts to believers for the “edification”, or building up, of the Body of Christ (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:11-16)
- builds us up in our faith as we pray with His help (Jude 20)
- equips us for Christian service

We need to learn how to recognize the voice and ways (sometimes more like “promptings” or “nudges”) of the Spirit. This is not something we do remotely, like some divine SMS service that only works if we are within range and have the phone switched on. (Some people never seem to hear from God because they are constantly switched off.) The criterion for Christian living in the New Testament was whether or not people had a relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Listening to the Holy Spirit is about having ears that are attuned to hear, hearts that are prepared to change, attitudes that we are willing to put aside, wills that are open to yield obediently to His will and purpose. There was a time when God declared that His Spirit would not always strive with people who were disinterested and rebellious (Genesis 6:3). What about today? The real test of church life does not lie in statistics or programs but the presence or absence of the Holy Spirit. God is still speaking. He speaks clearly, precisely and unambiguously. We can be orthodox, institutionalized, dogmatic, legalistic and “right” every time, but lack that sense of life, freshness, vitality and reality that only the presence of God brings. We can listen to the creed and the best sermons, but stop listening to God. What is He saying to you?

What can stop us hearing Him? Let’s see: there’s unforgiveness of those who offend us; then there’s hardness of heart, insensitivity, resistance, rebelliousness and (the old enemy) the daily rush. “Sorry God, I’m too busy to chat; I’m running late. People to see. Things to do. Catch up soon.” However, the Spirit never stops speaking. Some people journal their conversations with the Holy Spirit (like a spiritual “blog”), so that they have a record of the relationship and lessons that will sustain them when things get tough. Learn to be sensitive as He communicates with you.

The Holy Spirit also energizes our prayer life. Billions of people pray: to idols, to unseen deities, to ancestors, even Satan. Christians have a unique privilege in prayer. Pastor Jack Hyles emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit as our “prayer partner”. Paul says that:

*“... the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.” (Romans 8:26, 27)*

*How can we relate to someone we cannot see?*

I was once part of a search team attempting to establish the whereabouts of a backpacker who had gone missing on the rugged Inca Trail in Peru, between the railway settlement of Kilometre 88 and Machu Picchu, high up in the Andes. The Trail rises from undulating hills to high mountains, deep ravines and glacial watercourses as it crosses the snow-clad Vilcabamba range, where peaks exceed 6,000 metres above sea level. My interest lay in the fact that I was Vice-Consul in Lima and the lost woman was an Australian citizen.

The journey took us through intractable terrain and we had to keep together to avoid accidents or getting lost. We were far from medical aid. Late one afternoon, we had to work our way through tangled brush, mud and roots on the side of a mountain. The light was fading and a heavy fog was settling in. It was imperative that we reach the ridge above the high jungle and pitch our tents for the night before exposure to the cold and wet beat us. As I beat back brush in front of me, I suddenly became aware of a deadly silence. I had lost my guide. I called out, but my voice was cushioned by the heavy mist. I started to panic. Not the best place to wander off the path. To one side were steep ridges; a wrong step could have led to injury – or worse.

It took a while, but my guide and I eventually re-connected by repeatedly calling out to one another. I learned an important lesson about keeping my eyes on the guide and listening to him, not being distracted by the surrounding environment and the difficulties of circumstances.

What do disciples of Christ do when we can never see the guide? After the death and resurrection of Jesus the disciple named Thomas (of the “seeing is believing” school) informed his companions that he would not believe in the resurrection until he saw him and touched his wounds. Jesus eventually turned up and put Thomas to the test, adding that those who could not see Him, but believed notwithstanding, were counted as blessed (John 20:24-29).

Discipleship involves more than an academic belief in the risen Christ; it includes relationship with a Saviour we cannot see. That's where the Holy Spirit comes in. He is our guide. Jesus said, "I will not leave you, like orphans; I will send Him to you" (John 14:18). We can't see Him, but without His guidance we would quickly become lost in the fog as we continue the journey.

*More than an experience – more like a pilgrimage*

The Christian life is described in the Bible as a “pilgrimage”. “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” (Hebrews 13:14) One of the most graphic descriptions of the Christian life (albeit with dated language) is “Pilgrim’s Progress, by John Bunyan. Pilgrims must keep in touch with their guides if they don’t want to get lost. I am reminded of a pilgrim route I once walked in northern Spain, where knowing the way ahead was important.

The “Way of St James” has been one of the most important pilgrim routes in Christendom since mediaeval times. The discovery, during the Muslim occupation of most of the Iberian Peninsula, of a tomb believed to be associated with the Apostle James, resulted in an endless stream of travellers undertaking pilgrimages to the site (now beneath the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela) as a basis for remission of their sins (if only their zeal were matched with a proper understanding of the truth). It was also associated for many years with the “Re-Conquest” of Spanish territory and was said to have prompted the beginning of a campaign to expel the Moors.

In fact, during the Middle Ages, the Camino de Santiago was the third most important route for Christian believers (the others being Rome and Jerusalem). Today thousands of pilgrims and tourists each year set out from their homes and walk the ancient route (the Spanish part alone is nearly 900 kilometres long), retracing the path of millions before them.

During the summer of 2005 a friend and I walked a stretch of the Camino, culminating in a church service in Santiago. I still have a wooden staff that accompanied me on my journey. As I walked each day, I talked to fellow travellers and asked them why they were there. Some did it out of religious motivation; they stopped at shrines along the way, went to masses and cited the apostolic examples of Saint James and other luminaries. As I passed by they would greet me with “Buen Camino. God bless you”. Others walked for cultural reasons; they studied local traditions, visited Roman ruins, tasted unusual delicacies and drank copious quantities of rich Spanish coffee. Others still undertook the Camino because it is a beautiful walk.

Day after day I trudged along with my knapsack; one foot before the other, through village after village, up and down steep hills and across beautiful valleys and rivers. I learned it is not how steep the road is, but how long. For countless kilometres I travelled alone. There were innumerable side roads, paths, alleyways, blinds and the temptation of better modes of transport, whenever the route passed through a town. I relied on my maps, signposts and the advice of locals, to ensure I did not wander in circles. When I finally reached the Cathedral in Santiago I knew I had not been alone for a second. The Holy Spirit had been talking to me, as I strode ahead with my staff, explaining elements of the more important pilgrimage, my inner life as a disciple of Christ. Jesus was not walking with me physically, as He did with the original disciples. That role was now played by the Spirit. But He was just as real, just as present.

### *Good Morning Holy Spirit*

Imagine waking up in the morning and experiencing the power of God's Spirit with you.

Pastor Benny Hinn of Orlando Christian Center in Florida has written a book entitled "Good Morning Holy Spirit". It describes Hinn's encounter with the Holy Spirit and how that meeting changed his life and ministry. While some parts of the book (particularly its first edition) were hugely controversial, I like the title nevertheless. When we wake up in the morning He is there.

British writer and Assemblies of God minister Selwyn Hughes (well known in the Christian world, due to the mass readership of his devotional notes, 'Every Day with Jesus', written over many years until his death on 29 January 2006) was credited with saying that he began each day with, "Good morning Father, good morning Jesus, good morning Holy Spirit." Before we stir and start our day, He is there, waiting to lead and guide us. We need never feel alone.

A friend once told me he regularly prayed the following prayer: "Good morning Lord. I want to thank you for this day. I haven't lost my temper with anyone. I haven't said a harsh word to my family. I am not holding grudges, not spoiling for a fight. This day has been good so far. And now I ask your help because I am about to get out of bed and I'm going to need all the assistance I can get".

Discipleship is not about you. It is not about your abilities, qualifications or great wisdom. It is about Jesus Christ. The power you need to give effect to His work comes from the Spirit of God (Zechariah 4:6). At the beginning of each new day make sure you are "plugged in" and listening to the voice of the Spirit. Your constant goal, as a disciple, is to draw closer to Jesus through each new experience and opportunity. Remember, He is with you. He is in you. As a disciple, you are never alone.