

Help, Wisdom & Strength for You Right Now

I began attending church as a youngster. Gung ho and willing to tackle the mountain, I was barely into double-digit years before I was reading my Bible, memorizing Scriptures and doing my dead-level best to obey every command I heard from the pulpit. I hoisted the backpack of good Christian living and set out to scale the lofty peaks of morality, spirituality and devotion.

Always tell the truth. Never lag in faith. Pray more. Do more. Believe more.

Believe me, I tried. But, boy, did that trail grow steep. Peer pressure, raging hormones and guilt conspired to convince me I'd never make it. Can a 15-year-old suffer spiritual burnout? This one did.

Maybe you know the feeling.

My Answer to Spiritual Burnout

The fire in your belly is running low on kindling. But where is the firewood? It's not for lack of searching. The Lord knows you've tried. At least you hope He knows. You've signed up and stood up for everything you know to be right and good. Yet why this cold wind in the face? Why this uphill struggle? These gray skies? This empty spot?

Drip by drip. Little by little. Day by day.

If that is you, can we talk? Can we start with this? The Lord does know. He does care. It is not His will that you lead a lifeless life. He has something—no, Someone—you need to know.

Ask people, “*Who is God the Father?*” They have a ready reply. Or “*Describe God the Son.*” Most will not hesitate to answer.

But if you want to see someone hem, haw and search for words, ask, *"Who is the Holy Spirit?"*

Part of the challenge is found in the terms. God as *Father*? We comprehend that image. God as Jesus, the *Son*? That idea is manageable as well. But God as *Spirit*? The word itself is mystical.

I was wrapping up my senior year of high school when an evangelist from a far-off country called California showed up in a school bus that had been painted to look like a flower garden. He set up camp in the school parking lot and began preaching about Christ and the power of the Spirit. By that time in my life, I'd abandoned the steep mountain trail of spirituality. The only spirit I knew came in the form of a liquor store bottle. And for the first time that I can recall, I heard someone describe the work of the Holy Spirit. The exact words I've long since forgotten. But the sentiment I readily remember: The Spirit is your life-giving friend, here to lead you home. These people didn't seem trail weary. They were invigorated.

After my burnout, I was so convinced that I was unqualified to walk with the Spirit I didn't even try.

Years of prodigal living ensued. The pigpen became my home address, and the other pigs were my tribe. Worse still, I continued to call myself a Christian, hopping nightclubs on Saturday nights, sitting in a pew on Sunday mornings. I was the hypocrite who turns others away from Christ.

In my early 20s, a dear man who eventually became a dear friend helped me believe that God's grace was greater than my rebellion. I knelt at a church altar, trusted heaven's mercy and set out on the trail again. Forgiveness became my message, my life story. I changed my career path, went through seminary and served churches in Miami and Rio de Janeiro and eventually settled down as a pastor in San Antonio, Texas.

That's where the wheels came off again.

If you think the trail of Christian living is steep for a youngster, it is even more so for a minister. I resolved to study hard, counsel wisely, solve problems, organize committees and satisfy each cranky member. I maintained a game face for three or four years, but somewhere in my mid 30s I ran out of fuel. On more than one Sunday morning, I stood before the church having had little, if any, sleep. I was desperate.

Was this the season in which I found the Holy Spirit? Sort of. It would be more accurate to say the Spirit found me.

In those late-night hours when I could not sleep, I would climb out of bed, pad down the stairs and kneel at our couch and pray. Dejected figure I was. Not Max the pastor. Not Max the church leader. That fellow in the crumpled pajamas was Max the depleted, confused disciple.

My prayers were moans. My faith was a frazzled thread. I couldn't even summon the energy to fake it. I was honest. Honest to God, I was. Turns out God has a soft spot for an honest prayer.

Little by little I began to sense the Spirit. He led with a kind touch. He wooed with a whisper. Mysterious? By all means. But figment of my imagination? No. Not at all.

I requested strength. He gave it. I asked the Spirit to heal the sick. More than once he did. I prayed for vitality and joy. Both returned. The long winter thawed into a welcome spring.

One day while studying for a message, I read the words Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit: *comforter* and *friend*. I recall having this wonderful realization: "I know that Person."

That was three decades ago. I no longer think of the Holy Spirit as the Holy Who. I now call him our heaven-sent Helper. He is the ally of the saint. He is our champion, our advocate, our guide. He comforts and directs us. He indwells, transforms, sustains and will someday deliver us into our heavenly home.

And He is here to infuse us with his strength. Supernatural strength.

4 Ways Spiritual Gifts are Misunderstood

The topics of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts seem to bring out the extremists among us. On one hand there are the show-offs. These are the people who make us feel unspiritual by appearing super spiritual. They are buddy-buddy with the Spirit, wear a backstage pass and want everyone to see their healing gifts, hear their mystical tongue. They make a ministry out of making others feel less than godly. They like to show off.

On the opposite extreme is the Spirit Patrol. They clamp down on anything that seems out of line or out of control. They are self-deputized hall monitors of the supernatural. If an event can't be explained, they dismiss it.

Somewhere in between is the healthy saint. He has a childlike heart. She has a high regard for Scripture. He is open to fresh strength. She is discerning and careful. Both he and she seek to follow the Spirit. They clutch with both hands this final promise of Jesus: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8, NKJV).

This power shows up in many ways, and some of those ways are through spiritual gifts. And if you've ever been perplexed by this concept, I'd like to take a few moments to clarify some common misunderstandings about these gifts from the Spirit.

Misunderstanding #1: The spiritual gifts listed in the Bible

are the only gifts you can have

No gift list is complete. The New Testament has at least five: 1 Corinthians 12:8–10; 1 Corinthians 12:28–30; Romans 12:6–8; Ephesians 4:11–12; 1 Peter 4:10–11. It was not the intent of the apostle, in any of the epistles, to create an exhaustive list. This is proved by the fact that no two lists are identical. They are suggestive of the type of work the Holy Spirit does.

Misunderstanding #2: Gifts are only given at the moment of conversion

Not all gifts are given at the moment of conversion. If a person received all their gifts upon conversion, there would be no call to “eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit” (1 Cor. 14:1, NIV). Part of the excitement of living in step with the Spirit is to expect further equipping.

Misunderstanding #3: Spiritual gifts are a sure sign of spiritual maturity

Spiritual gifts are not an index of spiritual maturity. The Corinthian church had all the gifts (1 Cor. 1:4–8) but were lacking in Christian character. They clustered around personalities (1:10–17; 3:1–23), tolerated immorality (5:1–13), litigated against each other (6:1–11), abused the Lord’s Supper (11:17–34), and used worship for self-promotion (12–14). The presence of gifts requires the maturity to use them wisely.

Misunderstanding #4: Spiritual gifts are the same as natural talents

Natural talents and spiritual gifts are not always identical. Natural gifts advance personal causes; spiritual gifts advance God’s cause. However, your spiritual gift can be a divine application of your natural strength. Paul, for example, taught powerfully before his conversion. On the Damascus road

Christ requisitioned the teaching strength for His purpose. If you managed people before following Christ, you will likely manage people after following Christ. Then again, the Holy Spirit might grant you a new gift altogether.

When it comes to spiritual gifts, let's not lose what matters most: Spiritual gifts exist to exalt Christ, edify the church and bless the needy. Gifts are not for personal and individual aggrandizement. They are to be used to build up the church.

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