

BEAUTY
for
ASHES



Zac Poonen

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by

Zac Poonen

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To ANNIE
*my devoted helpmeet,
who has faithfully stood behind the scenes
and upheld me in my ministry.
The mouth could not speak,
neither could the hand write,
if the heart did not pump the life-blood to them.*

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This Book and You

God had a great and glorious purpose for man when He created him. Of all created beings, man alone was created with the capacity to share in God's life and to partake of the Divine nature. But he could enjoy this privilege only as he voluntarily chose to live a life centred in God.

The two trees in the garden of Eden were symbolic of two ways of living. Adam could either partake of the tree of life (which symbolized God Himself) and live by the Divine life, or else he could choose the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and thus develop his own self-life and live independently of God. As we all know, he chose the latter. Having descended from Adam, we all have this over-developed self-life now.

But God's purpose for man did not change when Adam fell. The coming of Christ into the world was in order that we might be delivered from this self-centred life that we have inherited, and once again have the opportunity to partake of the tree of life. This is the abundant life that Christ offers us.

Isaiah had prophesied (*Isaiah 61:1-3*) that Christ, when He came, would set people free

from bondage. Man is bound not only by the Devil but also by his self-life. Christ came to set us free from both. Isaiah said that Christ would give those He liberated, *beauty* to replace their *ashes*. Ashes are a most appropriate symbol of the self-life – picturing its ugliness and its uselessness.

***Christ offers to give us the beauty of
His own life to replace the ashes of our
self-life.***

What a privilege! Yet many Christians do not enjoy this fully. Why not?
How can we enjoy it?
That is the subject of this book.

These messages were given at the Nilgiris Keswick (Deeper Life) Convention held at Coonoor, South India, in May 1971.

We shall look at *four* characters from the Bible in the pages that follow; and each of them will have something to teach us.

Zac Poonen — Bangalore, India

CHAPTER 1

The Corruption of the Self-Life

We can never enjoy deliverance from our self-life before we see something of its total corruption. Let us look at the elder son (in the parable in *Luke 15*), for he illustrates, perhaps better than anyone else in the Bible, the utter rottenness of the self-life.

The younger son in the parable is usually considered the worse of the two boys. But as we look a little more carefully at the elder brother, we will discover that in God's eyes, he was just as bad, if not worse. True, he did not commit the same sins as his younger brother. But his heart was crooked and self-centred.

Man's Total Depravity

The human heart is basically the same in every individual. When the Bible describes the human heart as deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (*Jeremiah 17:9*), it refers to every child of Adam. The refinements of civilization, lack of opportunity to commit sin and

a sheltered upbringing may perhaps have kept us from falling into the grosser sins that some others have fallen into. But we cannot, on that count, consider ourselves better than they. For if we had had the same pressures they faced, we would have undoubtedly ended up committing the same sins. This may be a humiliating fact for us to acknowledge, but it is true. The sooner we recognize this fact, the sooner we shall experience deliverance. Paul recognized that no good thing dwelt in his flesh (*Romans 7:18*). That was his first step to freedom (*Romans 8:2*).

Men look on the outward appearance and call some good and others bad. But God Who looks at the heart sees all men in the same condition. The Bible teaches the total depravity of all men. Consider *Romans 3:10–12*, for example: “There is none righteous, (and just in case we think that is an overstatement, it continues to say), *no, not one*. There is none that understands, there is no-one who seeks after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable. There is no-one who does good, *no, not one*.” *Romans 3:10–20* is a summing-up of the guilt of all humanity – of the irreligious as well as the religious. In *Romans 1:18–32* we have a description of “*the younger son*” – the externally immoral and godless man. In *Romans 2*, we have a portrayal of “*the elder son*” – the

religious man who is just as bad a sinner. After having described these two categories of people, the Holy Spirit sums up the case by saying that both groups are alike guilty. There is no difference between one and the other.

Man is indeed totally depraved; and if God does not reach down and do something for him, there is certainly no hope for him.

Self-Centredness

The elder son (*Luke 15:25–32*) can be taken to symbolize a Christian *worker*. If the father in the story is a type of God, it would be legitimate to consider the son as a type of an active Christian – for we see him in the parable coming home after a day’s work in his father’s fields. Here was no lazy young man, sitting at home and enjoying his father’s wealth. Here was one who worked hard for his father, one who *apparently* loved his father more than his younger brother did – for after all, he did not leave home and waste his father’s wealth, like the latter. He was *apparently* more devoted, but actually, as we shall see, just as selfish as his younger brother. It is the picture of a believer active in the Lord’s work and apparently full of devotion to his Lord but still centred in himself.

God created this world with certain laws built into it. If those laws are violated, there will be some form of loss or injury. Consider one law for example: God has ordained that the earth should revolve around the sun. If the earth had a will of its own and decided one day that it would no longer be centred in the sun, but would only revolve around itself, there would be no change of seasons and soon all life on earth would perish. Death would enter in.

In the same way, Adam was created to be centred in God. The day he refused God as his Centre and chose to be centred in himself – this is what was implied in his choosing to eat of the tree that God had forbidden – he died, as God had said he would.

There is a lesson here for us: In the measure in which our Christian life and service are centred in *ourselves*, in that measure we shall experience spiritual *death* – in spite of our being born again and in spite of our fundamentalism. And all unconsciously, we shall be ministering spiritual death to others too. We may have a reputation as keen and zealous workers for the Father (as the elder son perhaps had), but we may still merit the rebuke of the Lord, “I know your reputation as a live and active (Christian), but you are dead” (*Revelation 3:1* - LB). This is a tragic but dangerous possibility in Christian

work. Many a Christian worker lives on the reputation he has built up for himself. Looked up to by others, he is often unconscious of the fact, that God sees him in an altogether different light. Never having been delivered from self-centredness himself, he is unable to deliver others – even if he preaches beautifully!

And so, a warning is given for all of us in the story of the elder son.

Recognizing the Evil Within

God often allows times of pressure to come into our lives to bring up from within us our corrupt self-life, so that we begin to see ourselves as we really are. It is fairly easy for us to consider ourselves spiritual when our circumstances are easy. When we have no problems to tackle, when nobody is irritating us, when things are going smoothly and our co-workers are congenial, we can deceive ourselves concerning the real state of our hearts. But wait till we get a co-worker who irritates us, or a neighbour who annoys us all the time, and the veneer of spirituality disappears. Our self-life will then manifest itself in all its ugliness.

This was what happened to the elder son. When his younger brother was honoured, he got upset. No one would ever have thought that

this elder son could have behaved so peevishly. He had appeared such a nice person all along. But he hadn't faced pressure like this before. Now, his real nature was manifested. It was not the provocation at that moment that made him evil. No. The provocation merely brought up to the surface what was within all the time.

Amy Carmichael has said, "A cup brimful of *sweet* water cannot spill even one drop of *bitter* water, however suddenly jolted". If bitter water comes out of our lives and our lips, it is because it has always been there. It is not the provocation or the irritation that make us bitter or unspiritual. They only bring out of us what is already within. And so it should make us deeply thankful to God that He allows such times to come upon our lives when we see the corruption of our own natures. If it were not for such occasions, we might never realize that there is a fountain of corruption within us, and that not one good thing dwells in our flesh.

This also teaches us that suppression is *not* victory. One person may explode in anger in a trying situation, while another, with a little more self-control, in a similar situation, may only boil inwardly, without any steam escaping through his lips! In men's eyes, the second person may have a reputation for meekness. But God Who sees the hearts knows that both men

boiled within and considers them both equally bad. The difference in their external conduct was merely a result of different temperaments, which matter nothing to God.

If suppression were victory, then I think salesmen are among the most Christ-like people that I have ever met! No matter how much their customers tax their patience, they still retain a gracious attitude towards them, for the sake of their business – even though they may be boiling within!

No. Suppression is not victory. God does not want us to merely *appear* delivered and spiritual – but to be *actually* delivered. Paul said, "It is no longer I, but Christ Who lives in me" (*Galatians 2:20*). This is the point to which God wants to bring us.

Let us look at the characteristics of the self-life in two aspects. First, its attitude to God, and secondly, its attitude to its fellowmen. We see both of these illustrated in the story of the elder son.

The Self-centred Person's Attitude to God

Legalism

The attitude of the self-centred life to God and to His service is characterized by a spirit of legalism. Self can try to serve God. It can

be very active in such service too – but it is always legalistic service. It seeks a reward for the service it offers to God. “I have served you all these years,” the elder son tells the father, “but you never gave me a kid.” He had served his father for reward all along, but it had not been evident until now. This moment of pressure brought out the truth.

That is how self serves God – not freely, joyfully and spontaneously, but hoping for a return. The return expected may even be some spiritual blessing from God. But service done with even such a motive is legalistic and unacceptable to God.

The elder son considered his father hard and cruel for not having rewarded his service during all those years. He was like the man who was given one talent, who came up to his master at reckoning time and said, “I’ve kept your talent safe [without trading it for profit], because I was afraid [you would demand my profits] for you are *a hard man to deal with*” (Luke 19:21 - LB). Self considers God to be so difficult to please, and so it strives and strives to do God’s service and still condemns itself for not having satisfied the requirements of such a “demanding” God!

That is not the type of service that God expects from any of us. The Bible says, “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). In the matter

of service, too, God delights in one who serves cheerfully, neither grudgingly nor of necessity. He would rather have no service at all, than *reluctant* service. When one serves for reward, it is but a short while before he is complaining to God that he is not being blessed sufficiently. The matter becomes worse when someone else is more blessed than him.

Do we ever compare our work and the blessing we receive with that of others? This can only be the result of legalistic service. Jesus once told a parable about some labourers who were employed at different hours of the day by a certain man. At the end of the day the master gave them each a denarius. Those who had worked longest came up to the master and complained saying, “How can you give us the same wages as these other people? We deserve more.” These people had served for wages – and when they got what they had agreed for, they complained that others should not be given as much as they (Matthew 20:1–16).

This is exactly what we see in the elder son. He says to his father, “How can you give all this to my younger brother. I am the one who has served you faithfully, not he”.

When the Israelites served God grudgingly, He sent them into captivity as He had told them He would: “Because you did not serve the Lord

your God with joy and gladness of heart ... therefore you will serve your enemies" (*Deuteronomy 28:47*). God has no pleasure in legalistic service.

Self-centred Christians often serve God in order to keep up an impression of spirituality in the eyes of others. It is not pure and fervent love for Christ that keeps them active in Christian work, but the fear that others will consider them unspiritual if they do nothing. And when such people choose an easy path for themselves and one that will bring them financial gain, they try so hard to convince everybody that God has led them that way! Wherein is the need for such self-justification, unless there be the secret fear that others may now think less of their spirituality! What strain and bondage there is in serving God like that.

What joy and liberty there is in service that springs out of love for Christ! Love is the oil that lubricates the machinery of our lives so that it doesn't creak or groan! Jacob laboured for seven years in order to obtain Rachel. And the Bible says that those seven years "seemed to him just as a few days, because of his love for her" (*Genesis 29:20*). So will it be with us, when our service for God springs out of love. There will be no strain and no drudgery.

The Bible teaches that Christ's relationship with His church is like that of a husband to

his wife. What does a husband expect primarily from his wife? Not her service. He does not marry her, for her to cook his food and wash his clothes, as of first importance. What he desires primarily is her love. Without that, all else is valueless. This is what God seeks from us too.

Unteachability

Another characteristic of the self-centred life is its unteachability. When the elder son was angry and stood outside the house, his father came out and entreated him. But he was stubborn and refused to listen.

Truly, "it is better to be a poor but wise youth than to be an old and foolish king who refuses all advice" (*Ecclesiastes 4:13* - LB). The one who feels that he knows everything and is therefore unwilling to learn from others is indeed in a sorry state.

The self-centred individual is so sure that he is right that he is unwilling to accept correction. And so he does not like being criticized. Our spirituality is perhaps never so tested as when we are opposed and contradicted.

A.W.Tozer has said that when we are criticized, the only thing that should concern us is whether the criticism is true or false, not whether the person doing the criticizing is a friend or an

enemy. Our enemies often tell us more truths about ourselves than our friends do.

An unyielding, headstrong disposition is a sure mark of the self-centred individual. And let us remember that a rigid, self-defensive attitude towards our fellowmen is indicative of a similar attitude in our hearts towards God. If we are unwilling to be taught and corrected by our brethren (even by the youngest among them), it only shows how wrapped-up in ourselves we are, in spite of all our spiritual experiences and our Bible-knowledge.

The father pleads with the elder son, but the latter is hurt and filled with self-pity. The self-centred Christian loves to be coaxed and humoured and petted like a little child – even by God. God has to keep on pleading with such persons, but they do not listen easily. Ultimately, they may find themselves, like the elder son, outside the Father’s house altogether.

Do you see how horrible the heart of man is!

The Self-centred Person’s Attitude to His Fellowmen

Jealousy and the Love of Honour

When our fellowship with God is strained or broken, it invariably affects our relationships with our fellowmen. When Adam was cut off

from the life of God, he immediately lost his love for Eve too. When God asked him whether he had sinned, he accused his wife and said, “Lord, the fault is not mine. It is this woman’s.”

Jealousy is one of the characteristics of the self-centred life in its attitude to others. The elder son (in the parable) was jealous of his younger brother and this was what made him angry. All these years the elder son had been the undisputed heir in the house. The servants had bowed to him. But now his position is threatened. Someone else is now the centre of attraction in the house. And he can’t bear to see this. Jealousy, that green-eyed monster, was quick to rear its ugly head in his heart.

The self-centred life loves to be noticed by others. It loves the praise of men, and is evidently delighted when it is the sole object of admiration. It loves the highest place and draws attention to itself perpetually in one way or another. The self-centred Christian looks for opportunities to tell others of what he has done for the Lord – perhaps in a very pious way but secretly expecting their appreciation. And he is very unhappy and uneasy when someone else succeeds or has done something better than he has.

The self-centred person is easily upset and touchy. He longs to be recognized by others and

to be consulted for his opinions. In fact he would be quite offended if he were not consulted in a committee meeting, for example. He has such a high opinion of himself that he loves to talk and talk and talk, thinking that everyone else needs his valuable advice! There are Christians who, once they open their mouth, find it difficult to shut it again; and who keep on talking not realizing that everyone else around is nauseated. An uncontrolled tongue is one of the marks of an un-crucified self-life.

The self-centred Christian does not know how to take the second place graciously and joyfully. He is upset when someone else is given the leadership and he himself has to play second fiddle. The only time that he is willing to take the second place is when he knows that thereby he can step into the first place on the retirement of the leader!

It was said of the German Kaiser that he always wished to be the centre of attraction in every place. If he went to a christening, he'd wish he were the baby; if he went to a marriage; he'd wish he were the bride; and if he went to a funeral, he'd wish he were the corpse! Let us not forget that his heart was no worse than ours.

Self-centredness in a man makes him draw the attention of others to himself, even in the most sacred of activities – whether it be preaching a

sermon or even praying to God! A self-centred Christian leader will hinder the spiritual growth of those to whom he ministers – for he draws people to himself and not to Christ. A true man of God will always draw people beyond himself to Christ. This is what God calls each of us to do. But how few actually do this.

Hindering Younger Workers

A self-centred Christian leader hinders others below him from becoming leaders, lest his own position be threatened. And so he ministers in such a way as to make himself a necessity to those to whom he ministers. This is utterly contrary to God's will. Oswald Chambers once said that anyone who made himself a necessity to some other soul had got out of God's order. God alone is the only absolute necessity to any human soul. May none of us ever try to take His place.

No one is indispensable in Christ's church. God's work can easily carry on without us. In fact, it can carry on much better without the help of those conceited folk who consider themselves indispensable! We must recognize this fact constantly. I once read of a prescription to humble the soul of anyone who considered himself "indispensable"! It was suggested that

he fill a bucket with water and put his hand in it up to his wrist – and then pull it out. The hole that remains in the water will be a measure of how much he will be missed when he is gone!! Our gifts are useful to the church; but no-one is indispensable.

We must be willing to withdraw into the background anytime God calls us to. But the self-centred Christian worker will never accept that. He will want to hold on to his position for as long as possible. Many such “Christian leaders” are rotting away on their “thrones” today, hindering the work of God. They do not know what it is to fade graciously into the background and let someone else take their place.

You’ve probably heard the saying that success without a successor is a failure. Jesus recognized this and trained people to carry on His work. In 3½ years He had trained others to take over the leadership of His work. What an example for us to follow!

Paul recognized the necessity of training other people to carry on the work. In *2 Timothy 2:2*, he told Timothy, “What I have committed to you. I want you to pass on to other people who will in turn be able to train others (the fourth generation)” (Paraphrase). What Paul was saying in effect was, “You must ensure that you commit this treasure to others. Don’t ever hinder people

younger than you, from coming up.” Even businessmen recognize the principle that “success without a successor is a failure”. But many Christian leaders haven’t recognized it. Truly, “the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light.”

It is indeed nothing but self-centredness that makes a man jealous of someone younger who can do things better than he can. Cain was jealous of the fact that God had accepted Abel but rejected him. If Abel had been older than him, that might have been tolerable. But it was the awful fact that his *younger* brother was better than him that made him furious enough to slay Abel.

We see the same in the case of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph received divine revelations, and that made all his ten older brothers green with jealousy – so jealous that they wanted to kill him.

King Saul was jealous of young David, because the women sang, “Saul has slain thousands while David has slain ten thousands.” From that day he determined to kill him. Man’s history – and alas, the history of the Christian church too – is filled with the same story over and over again.

Likewise, the elderly Pharisees were jealous of the popularity of the young Jesus of Nazareth and determined to get him crucified, at any cost.

On the other hand, what a refreshing contrast it is to look at a man like Barnabas in the New Testament. He was a senior worker who took the newly-converted Paul under his wing, when no one else would accept Paul. Barnabas brought him to the church in Antioch and encouraged him. In Acts chapter 13, we read that Barnabas and Paul went out together on a missionary journey. And when Barnabas saw that God was calling this junior worker, Paul, to a larger ministry than his own, he willingly stepped back and graciously faded into the background. And the phrase, “*Barnabas and Paul*” changes almost unnoticed to “*Paul and Barnabas*” in the book of Acts. The Christian church suffers today, because there are few like Barnabas who know what it is to step back and let another be honoured. We are willing to step back in matters of no importance. When passing through a door, for example, we don’t mind stepping back and permitting another to go through first. But in the things that matter – such as position and leadership in the Christian church – we are not so ready to step back. Our self-life is so deceitful. We can have a false humility in things that don’t count. But it is in important matters that we see ourselves as we really are.

Pride

The self-centred person has an exalted opinion of himself. The elder son said, “All these years I’ve worked hard for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to.” He was proud of his obedient service to his father. Pride arises in our hearts, not because of our virtues and our successes alone, but also because we feel that others around us have not done as well as we. Pride is always the result of a comparison of oneself with others. If others around us were obviously better than us, we would never feel proud. If there had been another brother in this story who had served the father more faithfully than the elder son the latter could not have felt proud at all in the presence of the other. But here, he felt, he could compare himself favourably with his younger brother. “I have served you faithfully,” he tells his father, “but look at this younger son of yours. What has he done? He has wasted his money on harlots.”

It was through pride that Lucifer fell. He compared himself with the other angels and felt that he was wiser, more beautiful and more exalted than them all. He was the anointed cherub, but he became the Devil. Since then, many others have lost God’s anointing in the

same manner. You may be like an angel, but pride can turn you into a devil in a moment.

This was the disease that the Pharisees were plagued with. Jesus portrayed them accurately in the parable where the Pharisee prays, “Lord, I thank Thee that I am not like other men. I fast and pray and tithe etc., – ad nauseam. The self-life is like that. Sometimes, however, it can be more subtle – as in the case of the Sunday-School teacher who, after teaching this parable to her class, prayed, “Lord, we thank Thee that we are not like that Pharisee.” We laugh at that because we imagine that we are not like that Sunday-school teacher!! Like the layers of an onion, spiritual pride is deeply and subtly entrenched within us – even at times cloaked in a false humility – which is the worst form of pride!

The self-centred Christian worker is not necessarily one who goes about with an over-bearing attitude. He has plenty of false humility on the exterior, a pious lowly appearance and “humble” talk. But inwardly, he compares himself with others and glories in his goodness and greatness and “*humility*”!

Condemnation of Others

Such comparison of oneself with others finally leads to *condemnation* of others – sometimes

with harsh sarcastic expressions. Listen to what the elder son tells his father: “This younger son of yours has wasted your money on harlots.” Who had given him that information? No one. He had merely assumed the worst. When you hate someone, it is easy to believe the worst possible things concerning him. How the elder son delighted to expose his younger brother’s faults instead of covering them.

Do we see only the faults in other people? Have we secretly delighted in seeing another fall – particularly if he was one whom we did not like? Our hearts are so wicked that when other people fall, it does not grieve us entirely. On the contrary we are slightly pleased, for it shows us up as better men. Such an attitude is characteristic of a self-centred person.

Do we judge the motives of others? The self-centred person sees someone doing something and says to himself, “I know why he’s doing that,” and proceeds to impute some carnal motive to the action. How much the self-life takes upon itself – even to sit upon the throne of God (for after all, it is God alone who can judge the motives of others). Paul warns us, “Be careful not to jump to conclusions before the Lord returns as to whether someone is a good servant or not. When the Lord comes, He will turn on the light so that everyone can see

exactly what each one of us is really like, deep down in our hearts. Then everyone will know *why* (the motive with which) we have been doing the Lord's work" (1 *Corinthians* 4:5 - LB). Only when the Lord returns (and not till then) will we know the real motives of each person.

Lovelessness

The self-centred person does not have any real love for his fellowmen and this is the root cause of his hard attitude towards them. He may pretend to show much love, but lacks genuine Christ-like love. The elder son had never gone to his father even once in all those years, volunteering to go and search for his lost brother. He did not care whether his brother was dead or alive. All he was interested in was to make merry with his friends (*verse* 29). So long as he himself was happy, it did not matter to him what happened to others.

Are we wrapped up in ourselves like that? What is our attitude to backsliders? *It is easier to love an unbeliever than a backslider*. But if we truly have the compassion of Christ, we shall love both. The younger son in this story is a picture of a backslider. It's easy to condemn him. It is more difficult to love him and help him. The Bible says, "If a Christian is overcome

by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help him back onto the right path" (*Galatians* 6:1 - LB). And again, "If you see a Christian sinning ... you should ask God to forgive him and God will give him life" (1 *John* 5:16 - LB). Do we ever pray like that for those who have fallen? No. Why not? Because we are so centred in ourselves.

When we seek for a deeper life and a closer walk with God, let us never forget that a deeper life should make us more outgoing. God does not grant us a closer walk with Him merely for us to "make merry with our friends." It is so easy for us to get into our little holy huddles (with those who believe as we do) and to think of our enjoyment alone – all the time looking down on those who have not had our "deeper life experience." That is not the deeper life at all. That is self-centredness under the guise of spirituality; and it is an abomination to God.

Let us not be deceived. If we are only interested in "making merry" (even though it be spiritual merry-making) with other members of our "spiritual clique," and are unable to fellowship with believers who do not see eye-to-eye with us, then we are indeed in a state of spiritual stagnation. The Bible says, "He who does not love his brother is abiding in death" (1 *John* 3:14). The word translated "love" in this verse

is the Greek word “*agapao*”, which means “*to value, to feel a concern for, to be faithful to, and to delight in*”. And so this verse really means that if we do not value our brothers and sisters (even those in other denominations than our own) if we do not feel a concern for them, if we are not faithful to them and if we do not delight in them, then, in spite of all our Bible-knowledge and our spiritual experiences, we are in a state of spiritual death.

The Primary Ministry of the Holy Spirit

We may be young or old, holding any doctrine of ‘holiness’, with any number of experiences and blessings to our credit, but self dies hard, I’ll tell you that. We must know what it is to take up the cross daily and follow Jesus if we are to live in victory over self. There is no other way. We shall come to that in greater detail in the ensuing chapters.

But let us remember this meanwhile, that the Holy Spirit has come to help us put our self-centred life to death. The Bible says, “We naturally love to do evil things that are just the opposite to the things that the Holy Spirit tells us to do; and the good things we want to do when the Spirit has his way with us are just the opposite of our natural desires. These two

forces (our self-life and the Holy Spirit) are constantly fighting each other to win control over us” (*Galatians 5:17* - LB).

In these days, particularly, when many Christians are confused about the ministry of the Holy Spirit, it is good for us to bear in mind that He has come as a Helper to help us put to death the deeds of the flesh (the self-life). He does many other things in and through us. Let us not despise any of them. But if we do not allow Him to put our self-life to death, then all our other experiences are valueless.

The Bible says, “If you live after the flesh, you will die, but if you through the Spirit put to death the deeds of the flesh (and we’ve just seen some of the deeds of the flesh in this chapter), you will live – for as many as are led by the Spirit (in this way) are the sons of God” (*Romans 8:13, 14*). Verse 14 is often quoted out of context and made to refer to the Spirit’s guidance in relation to where we are to go or what we are to do. But it is really connected with the previous verse and refers to the Holy Spirit leading us to put to death our self-centred desires. The verse also teaches that this is the *identifying mark* of the sons of God.

In the parable in *Luke 15*, we notice that the father’s love was the same for both his sons. He did not love the elder son any less than the

younger. He came out of his house for both his sons. When his younger son came home, he went out of the house to welcome him, and when his elder son refused to come into the house, he went out to invite him in too. In fact he even tells him, "Son, you are ever with me and all that I have is yours." Do you see the largeness of God's heart even towards self-centred individuals? He loves us and wants to give us all that He has. But He has to deliver us from our self-centredness first.

God does not love the harlot more than the self-righteous Pharisee. He loves both equally and He gave His Son to die for both. But the response in the hearts of the two may be different; and that is what makes the difference ultimately in the Father's house. The younger son who was once away from the father's house is now sitting at the table enjoying his father's riches. The elder son who had been inside all along is now outside. Truly, as the Lord said, many who are first now will be last in eternity, and many who are last here will be first there. It is only as we are willing to humble ourselves and acknowledge our corruption and respond wholeheartedly to the Father's love, that we shall be able to feast with Him at His table.

May the Lord speak to our hearts.

CHAPTER 2

The Pathway to the Christ-Life

1. Being Broken

One of the verses which clearly describes the pathway that leads us out of our self-life into the full beauty of the Christ-life, is *Galatians 2:20*:

"I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live. But it is no longer I that live but Christ Who lives in me."

To us, this may be merely a good verse to be memorized or to get three points for a sermon from! But to the Apostle Paul who wrote it, it described his experience. He had exchanged the ashes of his self-life for the beauty of Christ's own Divine life. And this had become possible for him, because he had accepted death to himself.

It is only when the 'I' (the self-life) is crucified that Christ can manifest Himself in His glory within us. In *2 Corinthians 3:18*, we read that the Holy Spirit transforms us into the image of

Christ from one degree of glory to another. *This is the **primary** ministry of the Holy Spirit.* Day by day, and year by year, the Spirit of God seeks to conform us increasingly to the likeness of Christ. But the pathway from each step of glory to the next is *via the cross*. If we through the Spirit, put to death our self-life, we shall know the abundance of Christ's life, not otherwise.

We today, can no longer go freely to the tree of life as Adam could, before He fell. In *Genesis 3:24*, we read that God placed a flaming sword in front of the tree of life. And so, before we can partake of this tree, the flaming sword has to fall upon and slay our self-life. There is no other way to reach the life of God. The way of the cross is the only way to fullness of life. This truth is taught in plain words as well as through symbols, throughout the Scriptures, from *Genesis* to *Revelation*.

The cross *breaks* us as well as *empties* us. We shall consider these *two* aspects of the cross in this chapter and the next.

Jacob's Two Meetings with God

Jacob was a man who learnt experimentally what it meant to be broken. We can learn many truths from his life.

One excellent thing about the Bible is that it is absolutely honest in recording the faults and failings of its greatest men. The Scriptures do not portray marble saints. We see in the Word of God, men and women exactly as they were – warts and all. This is why the biographies of Biblical characters are a greater encouragement to us than many biographies written in our day (which invariably hide the failings of the men they describe, and present them as super-saints).

Jacob was a man of like passions as we are. He was called of God, no doubt, and eternally predestined to be a chosen vessel for the working out of the Divine purposes. But he had a corrupt and deceitful heart, just like ours. God calls ordinary people to His service – not supermen. Very often, He calls the base and the despised and the weak of the world, to fulfil His purposes. He puts no premium whatever on human cleverness and ability in His service.

Jacob must have met with God many times in his life. But in the record given us in *Genesis*, there are two meetings with God that stand out. The first at Bethel, where he dreamt of a ladder reaching up to Heaven, and where he said, "This is the house of God" (*Genesis 28:10–22*). The second at Peniel, where he wrestled with God and where he said, "I have seen God face

to face” (*Genesis 32:24–32*). Between these two incidents lay twenty years.

At Bethel, we read, he stopped to camp, when **the sun had set** (*Genesis 28:11*). That of course is only a statement indicating the time of day at which Jacob arrived at Bethel. But as we read the subsequent record of Jacob’s life (in the next four chapters), we find that *the sun had indeed set* upon his life. And during the twenty years that followed this incident, the darkness grew deeper and deeper. But that was not the end of the story.

At Peniel, he met with God again. And there, it is recorded, immediately after his meeting with God, that **the sun rose**, and he journeyed on (*Genesis 32:31*). Again a geographical fact – but true of Jacob’s life as well. He was a different man from that day. The darkness passed away and the light of God shone upon his life.

God has given us the record of Jacob’s darkness to show us that he was an ordinary man. He experienced the same darkness that we do. But he experienced a *sunrise* as well. And this encourages us to believe that no matter how great the darkness of our self-life, we can yet see the rising of the sun, if we will follow in Jacob’s footsteps at Peniel.

Let us then look at Jacob’s life – first when the sun had set on him; and secondly when the sun rose.

The Sun Sets

Jacob came out of his mother’s womb, grabbing his brother’s leg. “So they called him Jacob (meaning *Grabber*)” (*Genesis 25:26* - LB). And that is exactly what he was. He was always grabbing something from someone for himself. He grabbed the birthright from his brother and later the blessing from his father. He grabbed Rachel from her father Laban, and later grabbed Laban’s property as well.

Jacob was a *bargainer* too. He bargained with Esau for the birthright. And later, he bargained with Laban for Rachel. At Bethel, we find him even bargaining with God.

Jacob was also a *deceiver*. When he wanted his father’s blessing, he was prepared to deceive his father in order to get it. He was even prepared to take the Name of God in telling the lie. When Isaac asks him how he got the meat so quickly, he replies, “The Lord brought it to me” (*Genesis 27:20*). How lightly he could even take the Lord’s Name and tell a lie! He certainly had no fear of God.

Such was Jacob’s nature – grabbing, bargaining and deceiving – looking after his own earthly interests all the time. He was very much a child of Adam.

Coming Short of God's Calling

Finally, at Bethel, the sun set upon his life. There, in a dream, God gave Jacob a revelation of His great and glorious purpose for his life. He gave Jacob the same promises that he had given Abraham. But how does Jacob respond? He says, in effect, “Lord, I’m not so interested in all those spiritual blessings. If you’ll only protect me from harm and danger and give me food to eat and clothes to wear, I’ll be quite happy. I’ll give you one-tenth of my income and acknowledge you as my God” (*Genesis 28:20–22*).

Many Christians are just like that. God calls them to something great and glorious and they settle for something far, far inferior. God calls them to expend their energies in His work, but they waste their lives making money and seeking honour in this world. How few there are among God’s people who recognize their high calling! One such was a man of God who told his son, “I should not like it, if you were meant by God to be a missionary, that you *drivel down to becoming a king or a millionaire*. What are your kings and nobles compared with the dignity of winning souls to Christ.”

God’s purpose for us – as for Jacob – extends far beyond mere physical blessings. His purpose is basically twofold – first that we might *manifest* the life of Christ to others; and secondly,

that we might *minister* that life to others. This is the calling of the Christian – and there can be no greater calling on earth. Yet many Christians like Jacob, don’t recognize this – even some who are in Christian work. God gives them some spiritual gift or ability and soon they are taken up with that, and go off on a tangent, away from the central purpose of God for their lives. Like a child who is taken up with a toy, they are taken up with their gift. It fills their whole vision and they never see anything beyond. How cleverly Satan has sidetracked them without their even realizing it!

Jacob could not take in the vastness of God’s purpose for his life. He was satisfied with toys, when God wanted him to have heavenly riches. The result of such a narrow vision was that God’s purposes for Jacob’s life were delayed. God had to wait twenty years, before Jacob was willing to take his mind away from the things of the world and set it on things above. How many Christians are hindering and delaying God’s glorious purposes for their lives, because of the narrowness of their vision, because they are taken up with things lesser than God’s highest.

Paul was a different man. He could say at the end of his life that he had not been disobedient to the heavenly vision. On the Damascus Road, God had given him a vision of the great ministry

He had for him – to open the blind eyes of people and to deliver them from Satan’s power through the message of the gospel (*Acts 26:16–19*). And Paul never got bogged down with social work or anything lesser than what God had called him to.

But Jacob did not respond like that, when God spoke to him. And so the sun set on his life, and things grew darker and darker. But the wonderful thing is that God did not let Jacob go. God had promised him at Bethel, “I will not leave you until I have fulfilled My promises to you;” and God kept His word. This is what encourages us – the perseverance of God with His stubborn children.

Divine Discipline

In order to fulfil His promises to Jacob, God had to discipline him severely. And so we see from this point in the story up to the second meeting at Peniel, twenty years of Divine chastening in Jacob’s life in order that Jacob might come to the point where he would accept God’s highest for his life.

First of all, God placed Jacob alongside another shrewd person. Laban was just as smart as Jacob, and as they lived together and came into close contact with each other, plenty of friction was generated and some of Jacob’s

rough edges were rubbed off. God knows whom to place us with in order to purge us of our crookedness. God measures out His disciplines to us, according to our individual need; and He makes all things work together for our good, even when He places us alongside someone like Laban – provided we don’t rebel against God’s providences. Many people have learnt sanctification through God leading them to marry someone just like themselves. “The sparks fly when iron strikes iron” (*Proverbs 27:17* - LB) – but it sharpens both pieces of iron!

Jacob, as last, begins to reap what he had sown. All his life he had been cheating others. Now he gets cheated himself. He goes through his wedding ceremony, thinking he is marrying Rachel, but discovers the next morning that he has actually married Leah! He had met his match in Laban! He now gets a taste himself of the bitter medicine that he had been doling out to others. God does not discipline without a purpose or arbitrarily. He knows what dosage each person needs and gives the medicine accordingly. With the merciful, God shows Himself merciful; and with the stubborn, He shows Himself stubborn (*Psalms 18:25*). He knows how to deal with every Jacob.

Jacob’s problems were not yet over. After fourteen years of hard work, he obtained Rachel,

only to discover that she was barren. God was merciful and finally gave Jacob a child through her, but even this brings no change in Jacob. He still cannot trust God, but continues to scheme.

He next plans to rob Laban of his property. Jacob was clever. He knew all the tricks of the trade, and he knew how to get the best of Laban's cattle. How long God had to wait before Jacob learned to trust in Him and forsake his own human ingenuity. It is the same problem that God has with many of His children today. He is not impressed by our cleverness. He waits for us to see the folly of all that, before He can use us to fulfil His will.

We find Jacob finally scheming to run away from Laban. He is tired of living with his father-in-law and wants to go away. But when he does run away, he finds that he has only jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. He hears that Esau is approaching him with a large army and that Laban is pursuing him from the rear. The one who tries to escape God's disciplines finds that it is not an easy task. If Jacob had left the matter in God's hands, God would have released him from Laban in His own way. But Jacob had not learned to trust God yet.

Finding himself hedged in and his life in danger, Jacob now begins to pray. He is quick to remind God of His promises made at Bethel

(*Genesis 32:9–12*). But prayer alone is not sufficient for Jacob. He has to scheme too. He thinks up a clever plan of saving part of his company at least – just in case God lets him down. How very much like those who talk of trusting God and “*living by faith*”, but all the time have some earthly source of security to fall back upon just in case faith in God alone does not work! Jacob was indeed very much like us.

And how often we have seen, as Jacob realized when he met Esau, that our fears were unfounded, that there was no need to have schemed and worried and doubted God. Esau's heart was in God's hands, and God could turn it (as *Proverbs 21:1* says) in whichever direction He chose. “When a man is trying to please God, God makes even his worst enemies to be at peace with him” (*Proverbs 16:7* - LB). God had told Jacob clearly that He would take care of him. But Jacob could not believe God's promise.

Jacob had twenty long and painful years of chastening under God's hand. We are not given all the details of what Jacob underwent – but he must have had a very rough time. It must have been physically exhausting too – working and sleeping out in the open, exposed to the sun and the dew and the rain. But all this discipline was necessary, in order to shatter Jacob's self-sufficiency and self-confidence. Only in

later years, when he looked back, would he be able to appreciate what God took him through – not now. “God’s correction is always right and for our best good, that we may share His holiness. (But) being punished isn’t enjoyable while it is happening – it hurts! But afterwards, we can see the result, a quiet growth in grace and character” (*Hebrews 12:10, 11* - LB). As the well-known hymn says:

*“With mercy and with judgment, my web of
time He wove,
And aye, the dews of sorrow were lusted by
His love:
I’ll bless the Hand that guided, I’ll bless the
Heart that planned
When throned where glory dwelleth in
Immanuel’s land.”*

The Sun Rises

We have seen how the sun set upon Jacob’s life and how the darkness deepened through the ensuing twenty years. He was indeed an ordinary man just like us. And on such a man the sun rose one day. God met with him a second time and changed him into an “Israel” – a prince of God.

Only God could have seen any good in such a useless person as Jacob, and followed after

him patiently, without giving up hope. There we see the grace and greatness of our God. And this is what encourages us. In spite of all our self-centredness, God does not throw us on the scrap-heap. He is patient with us.

We may not believe in the doctrine of the perseverance of the *saints*, but we cannot but believe in the *perseverance of God*. “I will not leave you until I have done that which I have promised,” was His promise to Jacob at Bethel – and His promise to us. How wonderful and how humiliating it is to know the long-suffering of God in His dealings with us. If He were not like that, none of us would have any hope.

At Peniel, God dealt a final blow to Jacob. He had been disciplining Jacob and breaking him, bit by bit, over the previous twenty years. But now the time had come to finish the work with one final blow. If God had not done that here, it might have taken twenty more years for the sun to rise on Jacob. God knows the right time to shatter our self-confidence once-and-for-all.

Blessed by God

And when God finally broke Jacob, *then* he was truly blessed. The record reads, “God blessed Jacob there” (*Genesis 32:29*). The word “bless” is perhaps the most frequently used word in the

prayers of Christians. But few understand its real meaning.

What is *blessing*? What was the blessing Jacob got? It is described in *verse 28* as “*power with God and power with men*”. This is the blessing that we all need and that we should be seeking for. And this alone can make the sun to rise upon our lives. Nothing less than this is what God desires to give His people. Jesus referred to this blessing when He asked His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father. He said, “When the Holy Spirit is come upon you, you shall receive power” (*Acts 1:8*) – *power with God and power with men*. Jacobs would be transformed by the Spirit’s power into Israels. This was what made the sun to rise upon Peter’s life and upon the lives of the other disciples that day in the upper room at Jerusalem.

And this alone can provide the answer to the crookedness of our self-life. It is not a question of reformation or of good resolutions or even of our determination. It is a question of the Holy Spirit possessing us fully and governing and ruling our lives.

But where does the Spirit lead us? Always to the cross. It is only when we are crucified, that Christ can live in us in His fullness, It was when Jesus was baptized, buried under the waters – symbolically accepting death to Himself – that

the Holy Spirit came upon Him (*Matthew 3:16*). It was when Jacob was broken that he was blessed. It was only after Moses’ self-confidence had been shattered through 40 years of looking after sheep, that he was ready to deliver Israel. The rock had to be smitten before the living waters could flow. The Israelites had to go through the River Jordan (symbolizing death and burial) before they could enter Canaan (symbolizing life in the fullness of the Spirit). Gideon’s army had to break their pitchers before the light inside was visible. The alabaster vial had to be broken before the odour of the ointment could fill the house. Peter’s boastful self-confidence had to be shattered before he was ready for Pentecost. We find this truth throughout Scripture.

It would be dangerous for God to empower an unbroken man. It would be like giving a sharp knife to a 6-month old baby, or like handling 20,000 volts of electricity without proper insulation. God is careful. He does not give the power of His Spirit to those in whom self is still unbroken. And He removes His power from a man when he ceases to be broken.

Jacob was now blessed by God Himself. Earlier, Isaac had laid his hands on Jacob and blessed him, when Jacob brought him the venison (*Genesis 27:23*). But that had brought no change in Jacob’s life. The real blessing came

at Peniel. And this is the lesson we need to learn too. No man can ever give us this blessing. A man – even a saintly man like Isaac – may lay his empty hands on our empty heads and pray for us. Yet we may get nothing. Only God can really empower us. When Isaac put his hands on Jacob’s head, the sun merely set on Jacob’s life. But when God blessed him, the sun rose! Power belongs to God and He is the only one who can ever give it to us.

The record says, “God blessed Jacob *there*” (*Genesis 32:29*) – there, where Jacob fulfilled certain conditions and came to a certain point in his life. There were reasons why God blessed Jacob there – at Peniel.

Alone with God

First of all, Jacob was blessed in the place where he was *alone* with God. He sent everyone else away and was alone (*Genesis 32:24*). 20th century believers find it difficult to spend much time alone with God. The spirit of the jet-age has got into most of us, and we are in a perpetual state of busyness. The trouble is not with our temperament or our culture. We just don’t have our priorities right – that’s all.

Jesus once said that the one thing needful for a believer was to sit at His feet and listen

to Him (*Luke 10:42*). But we don’t believe that any longer and so suffer the disastrous consequences of disregarding Jesus’ words. If we are always busy with our various activities and do not know what it is to get alone with God in fasting and prayer, we shall certainly not know God’s power or blessing – His real power, I mean, not the cheap counterfeits of which many are boasting.

Broken by God

Secondly, Jacob was blessed in the place where he was *broken* completely. At Peniel, a Man wrestled with Jacob. God had been wrestling with Jacob for twenty years, but Jacob had refused to yield. God had tried to show him how everything he had put his hand to had gone wrong, despite his cleverness and his planning. But Jacob was still stubborn. Finally God struck Jacob’s hip-socket so that his thigh was dislocated (*verse 25*). The thigh is the strongest part of the body, and that was the part that God struck.

The strong points in our life are what God seeks to shatter. Simon Peter had once thought that his strong point spiritually, was his courage. Even if everyone else denied the Lord, he would never do so. And so God had to break him there. Peter denied the Lord before any of the others

did, and not just once but thrice, and that too when questioned by a weak little servant-girl! That was enough to shatter Peter. In the physical realm, Peter's strong point was fishing. If there was one thing he was an expert at, it was fishing. And so God broke him at that point as well. Peter fishes all night and catches nothing. And that happened not just once but twice (*Luke 5:5; John 21:3*). God broke him at his strongest points to teach him his total inability to serve God.

It took 3½ years for the disciples to learn, that without Christ they could do nothing. It takes even longer for some of us. But it is only in the measure in which we learn the truth of those words that we can know God's power. When Peter was shattered at his strongest points – when he had been struck by God in his “*thigh*” – then he was ready for Pentecost.

Moses' strong point was his leadership potential, his eloquence and his training in the best academies of Egypt. He thought he was well qualified to be the leader of the Israelites (*Acts 7:25*). But God did not stand by him until, forty years later, shattered in his strongest points, he said, “Lord, I'm not the person for a job like that ... I'm not a good speaker ... please send someone else” (*Exodus 3:11; 4:10, 13 - LB*). Then God took him up and used him mightily. God has to wait till our self-sufficiency and

our self-confidence are shattered, and we are broken and no longer think highly of ourselves or our capabilities. Then He can commit Himself to us unreservedly.

Hungry for God

Thirdly, Jacob was blessed in the place where he was earnest and *hungry for God*. “I will not leave you”, he cries out, “until you bless me” (*verse 26*). How God had waited for twenty long years to hear those words from Jacob. He, who had spent his life grabbing the birthright, women, money and property, now lets go of them all and grabs hold of God. This was the point towards which God had been working in Jacob's life all along. It must have delighted God's heart when Jacob at last lost sight of the temporal things of earth and longed and thirsted for God Himself and for His blessing. We are told in *Hosea 12:4*, that Jacob wept and pleaded for a blessing that night at Peniel. What a different man he was that night compared with his earlier years when he desired only the things of this world. God's dealings with him at last bore fruit!

Before God blessed Jacob fully, He tested Jacob's earnestness. He said to Jacob, “Let me go,” testing whether Jacob would be satisfied with what he had got or whether he would yearn

for more. It was just as Elijah tested Elisha in later years. Elijah said, “Let me go,” again and again, but Elisha refused to be shaken off – and so got a double portion of Elijah’s spirit (2 Kings 2). Jesus, likewise, tested the two disciples walking to Emmaus (Luke 24:15–31). When they reached their house, Jesus acted as though He would go further. But the two disciples would not let Him go – and they got a blessing as a result.

God tests us too. He can never bless a man fully until the man is in dead earnest for God’s best. We need to thirst like Jacob, saying,

“Lord, there is more to the Christian life than I’ve experienced thus far. I’m not satisfied. I want all Thy fullness at any cost.”

When we come to that point, it is but a short step to the fullness of God’s blessing.

Notice in the incident at Peniel, that it was when Jacob was in a state of weakness (after his thigh had been dislocated), that he said, “I will not let you go, God.” God could easily have left him and gone, but He didn’t. For it is when a man is most weak in himself that he has greatest power with God. As the Apostle Paul said,

*“I am glad to boast about how weak I am;
I am glad to be a living demonstration of*

Christ’s power, instead of showing off my own power and abilities ... for when I am weak, then I am strong”
(2 Corinthians 12:9, 10 - LB).

God’s power is most effectively demonstrated in human weakness.

And so with Jacob, it is when he is defeated, broken and utterly weak, that God tells him, “You have now *prevailed*.” One would think that God should have said, “You have at last been *defeated*.” But no. The word is, “You have prevailed. You shall henceforth have power with God and with men” (verse 28). We prevail, when God has shattered us of our own strength and self-sufficiency – as the words of the hymn say,

“Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free.”

This is the glorious paradox of the Christian life.

If ever there was a picture of weakness, surely it is seen in a man hanging helplessly on a cross. Beaten and buffeted and finally nailed to the cross, Christ died as a weak and exhausted man. But there the power of God was displayed in the overthrow of the Devil and the deliverance of men (Hebrews 2:14; Colossians 2:14, 15). “Christ crucified is the power of God,” Paul

wrote to the Corinthians, “He was crucified in weakness, but He lives by the power of God. We also are weak with Him, but shall live with Him by the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23, 24; 2 Corinthians 13:4). The Corinthian Christians were mistaking the gift of tongues for evidence of being endued with God’s power, and so Paul had to correct their error. In essence he tells them,

“Brethren, the power of God is not seen in the gift of tongues. Thank God if you have that gift. But don’t make any mistake. The power of God is manifested only in and via the cross. It is in human weakness that the might of God is seen.”

I remember hearing a man of God saying how God showed him the secret of spiritual power. He had been seeking God for some spectacular manifestation for some time. Finally the Lord asked him,

“How did you receive the forgiveness of your sins?”

He replied,

“Lord, I recognized that I was the greatest sinner on earth and You forgave me freely.”

Then the Lord said to him,

“Now recognize that you are the weakest man on earth and you will have My power.”

Thus he began to experience God’s power in his life.

The way of the cross is the way of power. In the measure in which we walk that pathway we shall have God’s power in our life, and people will be blessed through our life and our ministry. When the five loaves are broken, then and not until then, will the multitude be fed.

Honest with God

Finally, Jacob was blessed in the place where he was *honest with God*. God asks him, “What is your name?” Twenty years earlier, when his father had asked him the same question, he had lied and said, “I am Esau” (Genesis 27:19). But now he is honest. He says, “Lord, I am Jacob” – or in other words, “Lord, I am a grabber, a deceiver and a bargainer.” There was no guile in Jacob now. And so God could bless him.

Years later, when Jesus looked at Nathaniel, you remember what He said: “Behold an Israelite – a true *Israel*, a genuine prince of God – in whom there is no ‘*Jacob*’, no guile” (John 1:47).

This is what God waits to see in us too. Only then can He empower us.

God blessed Jacob *there* – when he was honest, when he did not want to pretend any more, when he confessed, “Lord I’m a hypocrite. There is shame and pretence in my life.” I tell you, it takes real brokenness for a man to acknowledge that from the depths of his heart. Many Christian leaders say words like that with false humility – to gain a reputation for being humble. I am not referring to that type of abomination. What I mean is an honesty that comes out of a truly broken and contrite heart. That is costly. There is so much guile in all of us. May God have mercy on us for pretending to be so sanctified when we are not. Let us covet sincerity and honesty and openness with all of our hearts, and then there will be no limit to God’s blessing upon our lives.

The Ascending Sun

Jacob was broken and thereby he became Israel. The sun rose on his life at last. This did not however, mean that Jacob had become perfect. There is no once-for-all experience that guarantees perfection. God had to discipline him further, for he still had plenty to learn. In

Genesis chapters 33 and 34, we read of some of Jacob’s disobediences and blunders.

But the sun had risen on his life and he had entered into a new spiritual plane. The light had to increase in its brightness, no doubt, but that would come as the sun continued to ascend in the sky to its noon-day position. The Bible says,

“The path of the just (the justified man) is like the shining light (of the sun) that shines more and more (from sunrise onwards) unto the perfect (noon) day” (Proverbs 4:18).

So it was with Jacob and so it must be with us. If we submit to God’s dealings with us, as Jacob finally did, the light of God will continuously increase upon our lives. And as it does so, the shadow of our self-life will continue to decrease until finally when the sun is overhead (when Christ returns), the shadows will disappear altogether and Christ will be all in all.

What was Jacob’s testimony in later years, about his Peniel experience? He did not keep telling everyone that on such-and-such a date he had received a second blessing. No. His testimony was something quite different. In *Hebrews 11*, we are given an inkling as to what Jacob’s testimony was. There, we are given a record of some of the exploits of great men of faith

in the Old Testament – shutting lions’ mouths, raising the dead etc., Jacob’s name appears in the list too – and what do you think is recorded of him? “He worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff” (*verse 21*). It looks quite incongruous to include something like that in a chapter full of spectacular events!

What Jacob did, certainly does not look like a “miracle of faith.” But it was. It was perhaps a greater miracle than the others miracles recorded in the chapter. The staff had become necessary to Jacob, because his thigh had been dislocated at Peniel. Leaning upon that staff, he would always remember the miracle that God had wrought in his life, in breaking his stubborn self-will. His leaning upon his staff now symbolized his helpless, moment-by-moment dependence on his God. He worshipped God now as a broken man. He gloried in his weakness and his infirmity – and *that* was his daily testimony. So it was with the Apostle Paul too. And so it has been with the great men and women of God in all ages. They rejoiced in their limitations and not in their achievements. What a lesson for proud, self-confident 20th-century Christians!

Towards the end of his life, we see Jacob as a prophet. He prophesies concerning the future of his descendants (*Genesis 49*). Only a man who has been under God’s hand and who has

submitted to the Divine disciplines is qualified to prophesy. Jacob had learnt through experience. He was no seminary-qualified theoretician. He had been through the grill and qualified in God’s University. He knew the secret counsels of God. Truly he was a prince of God. What a wonderful thing it is to be purged by God. What fruitfulness it results in!

Notice finally, a word of encouragement that runs through the Bible. God calls Himself, “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (not “Israel,” but “Jacob”).” This is wonderful indeed! He is the God of Jacob. He has linked His Name with the name of Jacob, the grabber and the deceiver. This is our encouragement. Our God is the God of the man with the warped personality. He is the God of the woman with the difficult temperament. What meaning there is in the psalmist’s words, “The God of *Jacob* is our refuge” (*Psalms 46:7, 11*). He is not only the Lord of Hosts, but also the God of Jacob. Praise be to His Name!

What God has begun in us He will complete. As perfect as was the work of the Father in creation and as perfect as was the work of the Son in our redemption, so perfect will the work of the Holy Spirit be in our sanctification. God is faithful.

“He Who began the good work within [us] will keep right on helping [us] grow in grace until

His task within [us] is finally finished on that day when Jesus Christ returns” (*Philippians 1:6* - LB). He will complete His work in us, as He completed His work in Jacob. But we must respond as Jacob did at Peniel. If however we do not cooperate with Him, but frustrate His workings in us, we shall ultimately stand before Him with the tragedy of a wasted, fruitless life. God wants us to be fruitful, but He won’t compel us. He wants to transform us into the likeness of Christ, but He will never override our free-will.

The pathway to the Christ-life is via the cross – being broken thereon. What power is released when an atom is broken! What power can be released when a child of God is broken in God’s Hand!

May the Lord teach us this lesson and write it deeply upon our hearts.

CHAPTER 3

The Pathway to the Christ-Life

2. Being Emptied

The way of the cross involves not only being *broken* but also being *emptied*.

“It is no longer I”, said Paul. He had allowed himself to be emptied of the “I”, so that Christ might live and rule in him. Even Jesus emptied Himself when He came down from the Throne of God to the awful depths of the cross (*Philippians 2:5–8*). The cross will mean the same in our lives as it did to Jesus and to Paul.

We shall look at the life of Abraham in this chapter, to see what it means to be emptied. In *James 2:23*, Abraham is called “the friend of God”. He was a type of those who, in the New Testament age, would be called the friends of God. Jesus told His disciples, just before He went to the cross, “You are My *friends* if you obey Me (as Abraham did). I *no longer* call you slaves, for a master does not confide in His slaves; *now* you are My friends, proved by the

fact that I have told you everything the Father told Me” (*John 15:14, 15* - LB).

God calls us in this New Testament age to be, not just His servants but His friends – entering into His secret counsels and understanding the hidden mysteries of His Word. Abraham was such a friend. God revealed His secrets to him (*Genesis 18:17–19*).

God blessed Abraham mightily. And we are told that “all who trust in Christ [can] share the same blessing Abraham received” (*Galatians 3:9* - LB). What was the blessing with which God blessed Abraham. God’s promise to Abraham was, “I will bless you” (*Genesis 12:2*). We saw in the last chapter what it means to be blessed of God. But God’s promise to Abraham did not end with “I will bless you.” He went on to say, “... and you will be a blessing to others.” This was God’s full purpose for Abraham and is His purpose for us today. We are not only to be blessed but also to be channels through which that blessing is communicated to others.

Galatians 3:14 makes it clear that the blessing of Abraham for us today is connected with the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the One Who communicates the abundant life of Christ to us and then ministers that same life through us to others.

In *James 2:21–23*, where Abraham is called God’s friend, two incidents from Abraham’s life are mentioned:

1. *His believing God when God told him that he would have a son (verse 23 referring to Genesis 15:6).*
2. *His offering up Isaac when God asked him to (verse 21 referring to Genesis 22).*

These two incidents described in *Genesis 15* & *22* are brought together by James when referring to Abraham being called God’s friend. These two chapters in *Genesis* describe two important periods in Abraham’s life. Moreover, in these two important chapters, we find the first occurrences in the Bible of two important words – “*believe*” (*Genesis 15:6*) and “*worship*” (*Genesis 22:5*).

Since all Scripture is inspired by God, there must be some significance attached to the first time an important word occurs in Scripture. These two passages of Scripture therefore will have much to teach us concerning the true meanings of *faith* and *worship*.

And these were the two lessons that Abraham had to learn – what it meant to *believe* God and what it meant to *worship* Him. Both of these are possible only as we accept the cross as the instrument of our self-emptying.

Trusting God

Abraham had to learn that trusting God meant not merely intellectual belief, but also being emptied of self-sufficiency and self-dependence.

In *Genesis 15* (where the word “*believe*” occurs in *verse 6*), the paragraph begins with the words, “After these things...” (*verse 1*). The previous chapter, to which that phrase refers back, indicates that it was a time of great triumph in Abraham’s life. With 318 untrained servants, he had gone out and defeated the armies of four kings. And then at the end of all that, he had conducted himself so nobly before the king of Sodom, refusing to take any reward for his efforts. God had helped him marvellously on both these occasions. Now, in the hour of his triumph, it was so easy for Abraham to feel self-sufficient.

At such a time, God spoke to Abraham and told him that he was going to have a son. And not only that, but God also said that through that son would come a seed that would be like the stars of the heaven for number. It looked almost impossible, but Abraham believed the Lord (*Genesis 15:6*). The Hebrew word translated “believe” here is “*aman*” which is the word we use at the end of our prayers: “*Amen*”. It means, “*It shall be so*”. When God told Abraham that he was going to have a son, he replied with

an “*Amen*”, meaning in essence, “Lord, I don’t know how this is going to take place. But since You have said it, I believe it shall be so.”

God’s promise looked *difficult* of fulfilment because Sarah was barren. Of course, Abraham himself was still fertile. So there was some hope. In other words, the promise was not exactly *impossible*, but certainly *difficult*.

Helping God Out of a Tight Spot

After Abraham heard God’s promise, he must have reasoned with himself and said, “Well, I suppose, I should help God out in this situation, since Sarah is barren”. And so, he readily accepted Sarah’s suggestion to unite with Hagar his maid. He sincerely desired to help God. He felt that God was in a tight spot, having made a promise that could not, humanly speaking, be fulfilled. God’s reputation was at stake. And so, to save God out of this awkward situation, Abraham united with Hagar and produced Ishmael! But God rejected Ishmael as unacceptable, for he was the product of man’s self-effort.

So much of the motivation for Christian work in our day, alas, arises out of the same carnal reasoning that Abraham had. Believers are told that God is depending on their efforts and that if they let Him down, His purposes will not be

fulfilled! Things apparently have not worked out exactly as God planned and as a result He is in a tight spot now! Some exhortations to Christian service give us the impression that the Almighty is now at His wit's end and is desperately in need of our help!

No doubt, God uses human agency for the outworking of His purposes. He has voluntarily accepted this limitation because He wants us to have the privilege of cooperating with Him in His work. But that certainly does not mean that if we disobey God, His work will remain undone. No. He is sovereign. There is certainly a work for Jesus that we can do; but if we don't do it, He will just pass us by and get someone else to do the job – and we shall miss the privilege of being God's co-workers. Puny men are not going to hinder God from carrying out His program.

God can carry on His work very well without our help. We need to recognize this fact.

If our service for God originates out of any idea that we are helping God out of a tight spot, we shall only produce unacceptable Ishmaels.

That service which has its roots in human energy, fleshly wisdom, human ability and natural talents (even at their very best) is totally

unacceptable to God. Ishmael may be very smart and impressive. Abraham may even cry out to God saying, "Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee" (*Genesis 17:18*). But God's answer is

"No. He was born through your strength, Abraham. So I cannot accept him, however good he may be".

And so with service that originates from ourselves. God did not accept it then and He will not accept it today! If there is any human explanation for our Christian service – if it is merely the result of excellent theological training that our sharp minds have assimilated, or made possible because we have access to enough money to support ourselves in Christian work – then however impressive our work may appear in the eyes of men, it will be burnt up in the day of testing as wood, hay and straw. That day will reveal the multitude of "Ishmaels" produced by well-meaning Christians, who were never emptied of their self-sufficiency. The only work that will abide for eternity is that which is produced in humble dependence upon the power of God's Holy Spirit. May God help us to learn that lesson now, instead of having regrets at Christ's judgment-seat.

Works of Faith

Our self-life is so subtle and so deceitful that it can enter the very sanctuary of God and try to serve Him there. We have to watch that – and put self to death even when it seeks to serve God.

God's work has to be a work of *faith* – that is, one that originates in man's helpless dependence upon God. So it is not a question of how effective our work is in the eyes of men or in our own eyes. The important question is whether our work is the result of the Holy Spirit's working, or our own. God is not so much interested in *how much* is done, as in the question of *whose power* has energized the work. *Was the work done by the power of money and intellectual ability, or by the power of the Holy Spirit?* This is the real test of a spiritual work, a work of faith. In other words, God is more interested in *quality* than in *quantity*. God's true work carries on today, as of old, not by human power or might, but by the power of the Holy Spirit (*Zechariah 4:6*). We forget this truth to our own peril.

Man's Extremity – God's Opportunity

Isaac, unlike Ishmael, was not the product of Abraham's strength. Abraham had become *sterile* by then. (This is clear from *Romans 4:19*

where not only Sarah's womb but Abraham's body is also said to be "dead"). Isaac was born through God strengthening impotent Abraham. This is the type of service that lasts for eternity. One "Isaac" is worth a thousand "Ishmaels." Abraham could keep Ishmael for some time, but finally God asked him to cast him out (*Genesis 21:10–14*). All "Ishmaels" will have to be cast out one day. Only Isaac could remain with Abraham. There is a spiritual lesson here. Only that service which is the result of *God working through us* will remain for eternity. Everything else will be burnt up. You may have heard the saying, "Only one life, it will soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last." It would be more accurate to say, "*Only what Christ does through me will last.*"

Only that which is "*from Him and through Him and to Him*" (*Romans 11:36*) will last for eternity. (See my book *Living As Jesus Lived* for a fuller exposition of this.)

Paul lived and laboured according to God's living and working through him (*Galatians 2:20* and *Colossians 1:29*). Hence his life and labours were so effective. He lived by faith and he worked by faith.

In *Genesis 16:16*, we read that Abraham was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael. In the very next verse (*Genesis 17:1*), we read that

Abraham was 99 years old when God appeared to him again. We see here a gap of 13 years. Those were years when God waited for Abraham to become impotent. God could not fulfil His promise, till Abraham had become impotent. That is God's way with all His servants. He cannot work through them till they recognize their impotence. And in some cases, He has to wait for many years.

Abraham needed to learn what it really meant to trust God. He had to learn that it was *only when he became impotent that he could truly exercise faith*. In *Romans 4:19–21*, we read that although Abraham knew that his body was impotent to produce a son, yet that did not worry him. He was strong in faith and glorified God by believing that God was well able to perform what He had promised. He did not waver in unbelief, for his feet stood firm on the rock of God's Word to him. But when could Abraham exercise such faith? Only when he had come to an end of all confidence in his own ability. We too can exercise real faith only when we reach that state of utter helplessness. This is God's way, so that no flesh may ever glory in His presence.

This does *not* however mean that we do nothing. No. God does not want us to be reduced to a state of inactivity. That is the other extreme of error. God *used* Abraham to produce Isaac.

God didn't do it all by Himself, for Isaac was not born apart from Abraham doing his part. No. But there was a difference between the birth of Ishmael and the birth of Isaac. In both cases, Abraham was the father. But in the first case, it was in dependence upon his own strength; in the second, in dependence upon *the power of God*. That was the difference – and what a vital difference!

No Confidence in the Flesh

At the end of the thirteen years of waiting, when God appeared to Abraham, He gave him the covenant of circumcision (*Genesis 17:11*). Circumcision involved a cutting-off and a casting-off of human flesh. It symbolized a casting off of all confidence in self – as Paul explains in *Philippians 3:3*: “We are the circumcision ... who have no confidence in the flesh.”

Notice, that *in the very same year* that Abraham obeyed God and circumcised himself, Isaac was conceived (*cf. Genesis 17:1 and 21:5*). There is a lesson for us to learn here. God waits until we learn to put no confidence in ourselves and our abilities. And when we finally come to the place where we realize that it is impossible for us in ourselves to serve God and to please Him (*Romans 8:8*), and when we trust God to

work through us, then He takes us up and does an *eternal* work through us. At the age of 85, the birth of a child to Abraham looked *difficult*. By the time he was 99 and impotent, that which had been difficult had now become *impossible*. Then God acted.

Someone has said that in a true work of God, there are three stages – *Difficult, Impossible and Done!* Human wisdom finds it difficult to follow such reasoning, for spiritual truth is foolishness to the natural mind. But this is God’s way.

No flesh will ever be able to glory in God’s presence, either now or in eternity (See *1 Corinthians 1:29*). God is working to the point where finally Christ will have the pre-eminence in all things (*Colossians 1:18*). If there is going to be some work in Heaven, which lasts for eternity, which has been done by human ingenuity and cleverness, then all through eternity some man will be able to take the credit for it. But God is going to make sure that it will not be so. All that ministers to human glory will be burnt up at the judgment seat of Christ. Here on earth, men may receive the credit for something they do, but that will all be reduced to ashes before we reach the shores of eternity. One of these days, God will gather up all things in Christ and then throughout eternal ages Christ alone will have the pre-eminence.

Jessie Penn-Lewis was a woman whose writings have helped many people understand the way of the cross. About ten years after her conversion, when seeking to be filled with the Holy Spirit, she tells of how she got a terrible revelation. She saw a hand holding up a bundle of filthy rags and a gentle voice saying, “This is the outcome of all your past service for God”. She protested that she had been consecrated to the Lord for years. But the Lord told her that all her service had been merely *consecrated SELF* – the outcome of her own energy and her own plans. And then she heard one word spoken to her, “Crucified”. She had not asked to be crucified, she thought, but to be filled. But she rested on that one word and came to know Jesus as the Risen Lord!!

Self *must* be crucified, before there can be any service that pleases God. We may serve God with all our hearts and then say, “Lord, please accept these Ishmaels that I have produced.” But God will say “No”! He will say “No” now and He will say “No” in eternity.

Dependence on the Holy Spirit

Let us test ourselves in one area – the area of prayer. Do we really know what it is to pray what the Bible calls “*the prayer of faith*”? It is only

when we come to an end of ourselves that we can pray like that – for true prayer, as O. Hallesby has said, is simply confessing our helplessness to God. There is no credit in uttering beautiful, eloquent and impressive prayers. Such *ordinary* praying can be done by anyone – even by a heathen. But the prayer of *faith* can come only from one who has recognized his impotence and utter helplessness without God. This is what it means to “pray in the Spirit” (*Ephesians 6:18*); and that is the only type of prayer that brings and answer. As someone has said, what we need in our day is not more prayer but more *answered* prayer. Let us not fool ourselves, like the heathen, that God is pleased by our *much* praying. No. Prayer has no value before God, if it does not arise out of a recognition of our own impotence.

So little of evangelical Christian work today is a work of *faith*. We have so many electronic gadgets and other aids to help us in our service for the Lord that many of us are, all unconsciously, depending on them, rather than on the Lord. It appears as though one does not need to be filled with the Holy Spirit, these days, to serve the Lord. All one needs is a tape-recorder, a few Christian movies, audio-visual aids, and some rich businessmen to provide financial support. If added to these, one also has a

dynamic personality and eloquence or a trained singing voice, he can go out and “win souls for Christ”!

How far evangelical Christianity has drifted from the faith of the apostles! What a tragedy that the techniques of the business world have been brought into the sanctuary of God. Let us never be fooled by the apparent success of these methods. We can accumulate statistics of our “*conversions*”, but we shall realize in eternity that they were spurious. Heaven does not rejoice over our labours, because we have not delivered souls from their self-centredness, but merely entertained them and given them a good time.

God’s way has not changed. Even today, we need to be emptied of our self-sufficiency and filled with the Spirit of God, if we are to produce “Isaacs” that please God. The Bible says,

“Cursed be the man who depends on man and who makes his self-sufficiency the arm on which he leans ... for he shall be like a barren tree” (Jeremiah 17:5 – paraphrase).

However much such a man may give the appearance of fruitfulness to others, he will stand in eternity like a barren tree, for his work originated in himself and in dependence on human

energies and human resources. On the other hand, it says, “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and has made the Lord his confidence. He is like a tree planted along a riverbank, with its roots reaching deep into the water ... its leaves stay green and it goes right on producing all its luscious fruit.” (*Jeremiah 17:7, 8* - LB)

To change the illustration (to the one found in *1 Corinthians 3:10–15*), what are we building with – wood, hay and straw, or gold, silver and precious stones? One ounce of gold is worth more than a ton of straw after the fire has done its work. Only genuine works of faith will abide in that day of testing.

An End of Ourselves

In Edith Schaeffer’s book *‘L’Abri’*, she recounts how God brought her husband Francis Schaeffer and his co-workers, again and again to a point of utter helplessness. More than once they found no way out of their impasse. The enemies of the gospel almost triumphed at many a point. In their impotence they looked to God to work on their behalf. And He did – not just once or twice, but repeatedly. This is the type of work – *a work of faith* – that will remain for eternity.

It is not the size of a work that impresses God. The world looks for size and numbers. But God

is looking for works of faith – even if they be the size of mustard seeds.

And so, when God brings us to an end of ourselves, hedging us in on every side and shattering our hopes, let us take heart! He is preparing us for greater usefulness by bringing us first to the place of impotence. He’s equipping us to produce Isaacs.

This was how Jesus prepared His apostles for His service. What do you think was the purpose of His training them for 3½ years? They were not being coached to write scholarly theses that would earn them doctorates in theology! That’s how some people today feel they can be equipped to serve the Lord. But Jesus didn’t train His apostles for that. None of the twelve disciples (except perhaps Judas Iscariot!) would have qualified for a basic theological degree (by our standards), even if they had tried. Jesus trained them to learn one lesson primarily – that, without Him they could do nothing (*John 15:5*). And, I tell you, a man who has learned that lesson is worth more than a hundred theological professors who haven’t learnt that lesson.

Total dependence upon God is the mark of the true servant of God. It was true even of the Lord Jesus Christ, when He was on earth, as the Servant of Jehovah. In a prophetic reference to Him in *Isaiah 42:1*, God says, “Behold My

Servant, *whom I uphold.*” He does not stand in His own strength; He is upheld by God. Because Christ emptied Himself thus, God put His Spirit upon Him, as the verse goes on to say. It is only on those who have come to an end of themselves and emptied themselves of self-confidence and self-sufficiency, that God pours out His Spirit.

Look at some of the remarkable statements that Jesus made, which clearly show how emptied of self He was:

“The Son can do nothing of Himself ... I can of Mine own self do nothing ... I do nothing of Myself ... I have not spoken of Myself; but the Father Who sent Me, He gave Me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak.... The words that I speak unto you, I speak not of Myself”
(John 5:19, 30; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10).

Amazing! The perfect, sinless Son of God lived by faith. Emptied of all dependence upon His own self, He depended entirely on His Father. It is thus that God calls us to live too.

When we are self-sufficient, *we try to use God* to help us serve Him. But when we are emptied, *God can use us.*

A.B. Simpson, that great man of God who founded the *Christian and Missionary Alliance*

tells how he learnt this lesson in his own life. As a young pastor, he had struggled to serve God with his own energies until his health broke down. Finally he met with God in a way that changed his whole outlook on Christian service. He realized that *he* had been using God. Henceforth he would let *God* use him. He expressed his experience in the words of his well-known hymn:

*“Once it was my working, His it hence shall be;
Once I tried to use Him, now He uses me.
Once the power I wanted, now the Mighty One;
Once for self I laboured, now for Him alone.”*

This is what it means to trust God. And this was the first lesson that Abraham had to learn.

Worshipping God

The second lesson that Abraham had to learn was the true meaning of worship. If trusting God means to be *emptied of self-confidence and self-sufficiency*, worshipping God means to be *emptied of everything* (including one’s possessions).

As in *Genesis 15*, in *Genesis 22* also, the paragraph begins with the phrase, “After these things....” Here too, as we look at the circumstances that immediately precede this hour of testing, we find Abraham in a triumphant

position. The heathen had come to him and said, “Abraham, we’ve been watching your life and we know that God is with you in all that you do” (*Genesis 21:22*). No doubt they had heard of the miraculous way in which Sarah conceived, and were convinced that God was with this family. Ishmael had been sent away. Isaac was now the darling of Abraham’s heart. Abraham stood in grave danger, at this time, of losing his first love and devotion for God. And so God tested him again, and told him to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice.

Sacrifice and Worship

Have we ever heard God calling us to hard and difficult tasks like that? Or do we only hear Him comforting us with promises all the time? Oswald Chambers has said that if we have never heard God speaking a *hard* word to us, it is doubtful whether we have ever *really* heard God at all.

It is easy for our carnal minds to imagine that God is speaking to us with comforting promises all the time. Because we do not like the hard way, we can be deaf to God’s voice when He calls us to a difficult task.

But Abraham had ears to hear, and a heart that was willing to obey anything that God

commanded. He rose up early the next morning and went forth to obey God (*verse 3*). The record does not tell us what the old patriarch went through, during the previous night, after God had spoken to him. I am sure he did not sleep that night. He must have kept awake and gone and looked at his beloved son again and again; and the tears must have rolled down his eyes as he thought of what he had to do to him. How difficult it must have been for Abraham to offer up the son of his old age. But he was willing to obey God at any cost. Fifty years or so, earlier, he had put his hand to the plough when God called him in Ur; and he would not now look back. In the words of another, what Abraham was saying was:

*“Keep me from looking back –
The handles of my plough with tears are wet,
The shears with rust are spoiled, and yet,
and yet,
My God! My God! Keep me from turning back”*

There were no complaints and no questions. Abraham did not say, “Lord, I’ve been so faithful already. Why do you ask this hard thing also?” Neither did he say, “Lord, I’ve already sacrificed so much – much more than all those around me. Why do you call me to sacrifice more?” Many

believers often compare the sacrifices they have made with those that others have made. And they hesitate when God calls them to go further than others around them. But not so Abraham. There was no limit to his obedience and no end to his willingness to sacrifice for his God. No wonder he became the friend of God.

There was faith in Abraham's heart as he went up to sacrifice Isaac, that God would somehow raise his son from the dead. *Hebrews 11:19* tells us that. God had already given Abraham a foretaste of resurrection-power in his own body and in Sarah's, through the birth of Isaac. Surely it would be no problem for such a God to bring back to life an Isaac who was slain on the altar. And so Abraham tells his servants when leaving them at the foot of Mount Moriah, "I and the lad will go yonder and worship and [*we will both*] come [back] again to you" (*verse 5*). That was a word of faith. He believed that Isaac would come back with him.

Notice too that he tells his servants, "We are going to *worship* God." He is not complaining that God is requiring too much from him, neither is he boasting about the marvellous sacrifice that he is about to make for God. No. Abraham did not belong to the category of those who subtly inform others about the sacrifices they make for God. Abraham said he was going

to *worship* his God. And there we understand something of the real meaning of *worship*.

Remember how Jesus once said, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it and was glad" (*John 8:56*). Surely it must have been here on Mount Moriah that Abraham saw the day of Christ. In prophetic vision, the aged patriarch saw in his own action, a picture (faint though it be) of that day when God the Father Himself would lead His only begotten Son up Calvary's hill and offer Him up as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind. And that day on Mount Moriah, Abraham knew something of what it would cost the heart of God to save a wayward world. He came to a place of intimate fellowship with the heart of God that morning. Yes, he worshipped God – not just with beautiful words and hymns, but through costly obedience and sacrifice.

A deep and intimate knowledge of God can come only through such obedience. We may accumulate plenty of accurate theological information in our minds; but real spiritual knowledge can come only when we give up everything to God. There is no other way.

The Giver or His gift?

Abraham was being tested here as to whether he would love the Giver or His gifts more. Isaac

was undoubtedly the gift of God, but Abraham was in danger of having an inordinate affection for his son. Isaac was becoming an idol who would cloud Abraham's spiritual vision. And so God intervened to save Abraham from such a tragedy.

In his book *'The Pursuit of God'*, A.W. Tozer speaks of "the blessedness of possessing nothing". God was teaching Abraham on Mount Moriah the blessedness of being emptied of everything and possessing nothing. Before that day, Abraham had held Isaac with a possessive spirit. But after he laid his son on that altar and gave him up to God, he never possessed Isaac again. Yes, it is true that, God gave Isaac back to Abraham, and Abraham had him at home. But he never *possessed* Isaac as his own again. Isaac, thenceforth, was God's. And Abraham held Isaac as a steward holds the property of his master. In other words, he *had* Isaac, but he never again *possessed* him.

This is to be our attitude to the things of this world. We can have them and use them. But we are never to cling to any one of them. Everything we own should have been placed on the altar and given completely to God. We must *possess* nothing. We can then keep only that which God gives back to us from the altar – and we are to keep even such things only as stewards.

Only then can we truly *worship* God. This is the pathway to the glory of the Christ-life.

This principle does not apply to material things alone. It applies to spiritual gifts as well. It is possible for us to hold even the gifts of the Holy Spirit in a *possessive* way. Was not Isaac the gift of God? Why couldn't Abraham hold on to him then? To have to send away Ishmael was understandable, because he was not the promised seed. But Isaac's case was different. He was God's gift, produced in God's strength. Why should Abraham have to give him up as well?

And so we may argue too. We can understand the need to give up our attachment to the things of the world. But surely, we feel, we can hold on to the gifts that God Himself has given us. But God says,

“No. Lay even your spiritual gifts (which I have given you) on the altar and give them back to me, lest they fill your life and cloud your vision of Me, the Giver.”

God would have us delivered from any inordinate attachment to even the most sacred gifts of the Spirit that He has given us. He wants us to sacrifice even the "Isaacs" that we have received from Him and not cling to any one of them. Isn't it this that many believers have not

seen? They have given up their *Ishmaels* but not their *Isaacs*. They have given up sinful things. But the gifts that God gave them they are now using to glorify themselves – like the prodigal son, who took his father’s gifts and spent them on himself.

What is it that fills our vision – our gifts and our ministry, or the Giver Himself? This is what we need to ask ourselves constantly. We are most in danger when God has blessed us much and used us greatly. It is so easy at such times to lose the vision of God. We need to go back to the altar on Mount Moriah again and again and give our all to God repeatedly.

True worship begins when the Giver Himself fills our hearts and our vision. Only then can we safely use His gifts. Otherwise we shall abuse God’s gifts and prostitute them to selfish uses. Isn’t this the reason why there is so much misuse of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in our day?

That Which Costs Us Everything

Abraham’s devotion was tested that day when God asked him for Isaac. Had God asked Abraham for 10,000 sheep or 5,000 rams, that would have been easier for Abraham to offer. But one Isaac cost him everything, and he decided to offer nothing less than what God asked for.

Abraham could have said the words that David said, years later,

“I will never offer to my God that which costs me nothing” (2 Samuel 24:24).

Yes, true worship involves our offering to God that which costs us *everything*.

Interestingly, it was on *this very spot* (where Abraham offered Isaac, on Mount Moriah), that David spoke the words quoted above (the threshing floor of Araunah was located here). It was here too that the Lord chose to build His temple, a thousand years later (*2 Chronicles 3:1*). God ordained His house to be built on the very spot where two of His servants (Abraham and David) had made costly sacrifices. That was where the fire fell from heaven and that was where the glory of God was seen (*2 Chronicles 7:1*). It is even so today. God builds His true church and manifests His power and glory where He finds men and women who are willing to deny themselves and offer Him that which costs them everything.

Does our Christianity cost us something? Is our service for God an easygoing, cheap thing that does *not* cost us time, money or energy? Do our prayers cost us something? Have we drawn a limit to the sacrifices we are willing to make for God? Do we look for ease and comfort? If

not, how can we expect the fire of God to fall upon us and the glory of God to be seen in our lives? Let us not deceive ourselves. The fullness of the Holy Spirit can result only from a whole-hearted giving up of ourselves to God.

The way of the cross *is* painful. How painful it must have been for Abraham to face the thought of slaying his own son himself. It is not easy for us to see our children suffering as a result of the stand we have taken for God. That can be very costly. But blessed are we, if we are willing to suffer even that. God is no man's debtor. If we have honoured Him, He will certainly honour us; and we shall find our children following God too, as Isaac followed in Abraham's footsteps. Isaac's willingness to be tied to the altar and to be slain was an indication of his own devotion to his father's God. Isaac was a strong, able-bodied, young man, and his aged father could never have tied him to the altar, if Isaac himself had not been willing. But Isaac had seen the reality of God in his father's life, and so he was willing to submit to anything that God desired. We see Isaac's devotion to God here just as much as we see Abraham's. And we see how true it was what the Lord had said that Abraham would

“command his children and his household to keep the way of the Lord” (Genesis 18:19).

On the other hand, many believers have lowered their high standards and compromised their Christian principles, for the sake of some material advantage for their children – only to see their children growing up to break their hearts and live for the world. Oh the tragedy of it!

Heaven's greatest rewards are reserved for those who have followed in Abraham's footsteps, and who like him have not withheld anything from God, whatever the cost.

I remember hearing the story of a young American couple who went to China as missionaries, before the Communists took over that land. They asked their mission board to assign them to some unreached area that had not yet been evangelized. Accordingly, they were posted to a little village in the interior, near Tibet. They laboured faithfully there for several years, but did not see a single soul saved. God then gave them the gift of a baby daughter. And as that daughter grew up, they saw a miracle taking place before their eyes. They taught their little girl Bible-verses and choruses in the local language, and she in turn taught them to the children with whom she played. Those children went home and taught these verses to their parents. Soon *one* person was converted to Christ.

This missionary couple continued to labour there for another 14 years (making a total of 21

years) without a furlough, and in that period seven more souls were saved. (God doesn't measure success by statistics as men do. This couple had spent 21 years to show 8 souls the way to eternal life. Surely their reward will be great when Christ returns). At the end of those 21 years, one day the father noticed a patch on the hand of his 14-year-old daughter. They took her to a doctor who told them that the girl had contracted leprosy. It broke their hearts to think of what their child had to suffer because of their devotion to God and to His call. The mother and daughter travelled back to America for the daughter's treatment. But the man himself stayed on in China. When asked why he did not go back to America with his family, he replied, "I would have liked to have gone home with my family. But back there in my mission station, there are eight souls who need to be instructed and fed. If someone else replaces me, it will take years before they develop confidence in him. And so I feel I should go back to them." It cost that family everything they had, to serve God.

So many believers who have so much, give so little to God. But a few who have so little, give so much. And it is through this small and faithful remnant that God builds His church. The kingdom of God does not come through spectacular outward show, but through men of God

such as that missionary. Some of these men may not be well-known on earth. But they will shine as stars in eternity.

The apostle Paul came from a wealthy business family in Tarsus and could have chosen an easy life, when he was saved on the Damascus Road. He could have settled down to a comfortable life as a Christian businessman in Tarsus. But he didn't do that. He went out to serve God and endured hardship. He got 195 stripes on his back, he was stoned and suffered shipwreck, and he faced many dangers in his service for God. If we were to ask him why he endured all that, he would say,

"When I gave my life to the Lord, I determined that I would never offer Him any service that cost me nothing."

Two hundred years ago, the Moravian brethren formed one of the greatest missionary movements that the world has ever seen. Two of their number, heard of a slave colony in the West Indies and went there, willing to be sold as slaves for the rest of their lives, in order to preach the gospel to the slaves on that island. Two others heard of a leper-colony in Africa where no one was allowed to enter and return, for fear that the disease might spread. They

volunteered to go into that leper colony for the rest of their lives, in order to present Christ to the inmates of the colony. The motto of those Moravian brethren was “*to win for the Lamb that was slain the reward of His sufferings*”. They certainly knew what it was to *worship God*, by offering Him that which cost them everything.

How shallow and superficial our lives and labours are, compared with those of men like these. How much has it cost us to serve God – in terms of loss of money, comfort, reputation, honour and health? Do we realize that we do not really know what it is to worship God if our Christianity has not cost us everything that this world counts dear. Those who serve God wholeheartedly, giving up everything for Him, are the only ones who will have no regret in eternity. The Lord is calling today for those who will follow Him along the pathway of the cross – being emptied of everything.

Margaret Clarkson places this challenge so clearly before us in her hymn:

*“So send I you – to labour unrewarded,
To serve unpaid, unloved, unsought, unknown
To bear rebuke, to suffer scorn and scoffing,
So send I you – to toil for Me alone.”*

*So send I you – to loneliness and longing,
With heart a-hungering for the loved and
known;
Forsaking home and kindred, friend and dear
one,
So send I you – to know My love alone.”*

This is the way of power. And we need to be reminded of it again in a day when many think that there are short-cuts and once-for-all experiences that guarantee spiritual power. The way of the cross alone is the way of power. Jesus steadfastly set His face to go to the cross. What about us? We shall face this choice daily. If we are looking for three easy steps to the victorious life, then the Bible has no message for us. But if we are willing to pay the price of denying ourselves and taking up our cross *daily* and following Jesus, then we shall indeed know the power of the Spirit of God resting upon us for our life and service.

CHAPTER 4

The Beauty of the Christ-Life

Christ came to give us “*beauty for ashes*” – the beauty of His own Divine life for the ashes of our self-life. We have seen some of the characteristics of the self-life. And we have also seen that the way of the cross – the way of being *broken* and being *emptied* – is the only pathway that can lead us out of the darkness of our own self-life into the full glory of the Christ-life. One day, when Christ returns and all shadows disappear, the glory will shine undimmed on all who have walked this pathway. But even now, here on earth, our lives can reflect something of that glory. That is why God has given us His Holy Spirit Who wants to fill our lives. The beauty of the Christ-life is brought to us through the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

Before considering the characteristics of a Spirit-filled person, there are a few misunderstandings concerning the Holy Spirit and His ministry that need to be cleared up.

The Sovereignty of the Spirit

First of all, we must remember that the Holy Spirit is sovereign and works in varied ways. Jesus said, “Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it will go next, so it is with the Spirit” (*John 3:8* - LB). You can’t control the wind – either its speed or its direction. So too with the Holy Spirit. And yet many believers think that they can control Him and make Him work according to their rules and patterns.

When the Second Person of the Trinity was here on earth, the Pharisees tried to tie Him down with their petty rules and traditions. But he refused to be locked up in their watertight compartments. The descendants of the Pharisees in evangelical Christianity today are trying to tie down the Third Person of the Trinity to work within the confines of their traditions and their human understanding. But He refuses to work according to man-made patterns. He blows where He wishes. We can hear the sound of His working, but He will not be controlled or directed by us. We cannot say that He should work in the same way in other lives as He has worked in ours; neither should we expect Him to work today in the same way as He worked in days past. No. He is Sovereign. The best thing we can do is to set our face in the direction the wind is blowing and allow that wind to carry

us along. The Holy Spirit cannot be tied down in the doctrinal compartment of any denomination. We shall find that He surprises us by the way He works. Both Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals need to recognize this!

The Holy Spirit may at times manifest Himself like a *whirlwind*. There may be deep stirrings of the emotions and even physical reactions too. We must be willing to accept this. God spoke to Job out of a whirlwind (*Job 38:1*).

But we also need to remember that the Spirit may at times blow like a *gentle breeze*. When Elijah heard the whirlwind, it says that God was *not* in the whirlwind (*1 Kings 19:11*). No. Every stirring of the emotions is not from God. And so we must be careful. To Elijah, God spoke in a gentle breeze (*1 Kings 19:12*).

The Holy Spirit does not always blow like a tornado. Sometimes He does, but not always. We should not expect Him to blow like a whirlwind *all the time in everyone’s* life, just because He did so *once* in someone’s life. Equally, we should not expect Him to blow always like a gentle breeze. We do need His blowing as a tornado upon many of our churches today, to uproot the things that are dishonouring to Christ therein.

The wrapping should never be mistaken for the gift. The Holy Spirit Himself is the Gift of the Risen Lord to His church. When He falls upon

people, it may be with shouts of Hallelujah, tears of joy and the gift of tongues, or it may be quietly, silently and without much emotion. Temperaments vary, and the Spirit of God (unlike many Christians) is willing to adapt Himself to each temperament. It is foolish therefore to expect that others should receive the Gift in the same wrapping in which we received Him – whether spectacular or commonplace. Only babies are taken up with the wrapping-paper in which a gift comes. Mature men recognize that the gift itself is more important than the wrapping. The Apostle Paul was converted through a vision of Jesus. But he did not preach that all needed a similar vision before they could be saved. No. He recognized that it was the inner reality that mattered, in whatever wrapping the gift might come. So too with the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit and God's Word

Secondly, we need to remember that the Holy Spirit always operates in line with the Word of God – for He Himself has written that Word, and He does not change. We see this truth in the very first paragraph of Scripture. When darkness covered the earth, *the Spirit of God* brooded upon it, and *the Word of God* went forth – “Let

there be light”. And it was the joint operation of the Holy Spirit and His creative Word that brought light into the darkness and brought fullness and form where previously there had been emptiness and shapelessness (*Genesis 1:1–3*).

The new birth is attributed to the implantation of the Word of God in us (*1 Peter 1:24*), as well as to the operation of the Holy Spirit (*Titus 3:5*). Sanctification, likewise is the result of the working of God's Word and of the Holy Spirit in our lives (Compare *John 17:17* with *2 Thessalonians 2:13*). In the same way, the fullness of the Holy Spirit and being filled with the Word of God go together. This becomes clear when we compare *Ephesians 5:18* to *6:9*, with *Colossians 3:15–21*. In the Ephesian passage, we are told that giving thanks, praising God and submitting to one another in Christ-like home relationships, is the result of being filled with the Spirit. Whereas in the Colossian passage, these very same things are said to be the result of being filled with the Word of God.

We need to recognize this truth if we are to be balanced Christians. A steam-locomotive needs not only *steam* in order to move forward, but also *rail-tracks*. We need the steam of God's Spirit if we are to make spiritual progress, but we also need the rails of God's Word to keep us from going astray. One is not more important

than the other. Both are equally important. Some who claim to be full of steam, have ignored the rails and got stuck in the mud. Placing a premium on experience, they have not been careful to test everything by God's Word, and as a result have gone off the track. Like a derailed engine blowing its whistle furiously, many of them make a lot of noise in their meetings, but there is no spiritual progress – no growth in Christlikeness – in their lives.

Others have gone to the opposite extreme. Although they have kept on the rails, they have despised the need for fullness of steam in the engine (or have imagined that they have the fullness when they haven't), and they are stuck too. They emphasize the importance of the Word of God and are careful to cross every 't' and dot every 'i' in it. They keep admiring and polishing the rails. But they don't recognize that they need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. They are fundamental in their doctrines, all right – the rails are perfectly straight – but there is no steam to move the engine. They are *dead right* in their doctrines, but they are also both *dead* and *right!*

Our Limited Knowledge

Thirdly, we must recognize that even the best among us do not know everything about the

Holy Spirit and His workings. Some Christians give the impression that they have all the answers concerning everything that relates to the Holy Spirit. They have analysed the Biblical teaching on the subject and neatly pigeon-holed every verse. I'm terribly wary of such people for I know *they are wrong*. We do not know everything. We know only in part – and especially when it concerns the ministry of the Spirit (See *1 Corinthians 13:9, 12*). We need to acknowledge that our finite, sinful minds are not able to comprehend the greatness and the vastness of God the Holy Spirit fully.

A.W. Tozer has said that the most profound statement in the Bible is, "Oh Lord God, Thou knowest" (*Ezekiel 37:3*)! We all come to a point in our understanding of the things of God where we have to say,

"Lord God, I know this much, but there is so much beyond this that I don't know. I have come only to the fringe of truth."

As Job said,

"These are but the outskirts of His ways.... How small a whisper do we hear of Him! But the thunder of His power who can understand" (Job 26:14 - ASV).

Such an attitude will save us from a lot of carnal dogmatism on matters concerning the Holy Spirit, on which the Bible does not give us clear instruction. It will also give us a greater tolerance of other believers who do not see eye-to-eye with us on the Spirit's ministry. They may be wrong – but we may be too! That which is clearly revealed in Scripture is for our instruction. Beyond that we are not to speculate (*Deuteronomy 29:29*).

No Short-Cuts

Fourthly, remember that there is no short-cut to the Spirit-filled life – no easy formula that guarantees success. In our day, when push-buttons have replaced hard manual labour, and when man has generally accepted a philosophy of easy, comfortable living, Christians can all unconsciously bring this attitude into spiritual matters as well. The result is that we can think that there must be some simple formula for being filled with the Holy Spirit – “Take these three steps – and lo and behold, you are filled!” But we don't find any such formula in the Bible. We must beware of trying to reduce the Holy Spirit's operation in a person's life into a set of formulas. The fullness of the Spirit is not a

mechanical matter but a matter of life – and spiritual life cannot be expressed in formulas.

Don't Boast that You are Filled

Fifthly, a fact to be noticed in the entire New Testament is that although certain people are referred to as being 'full of the Spirit' (*Acts 6:5; 11:24*), *no-one ever testified to being full of the Spirit himself*.

I am not referring now to the baptism in the Spirit (or '*receiving the Spirit*', as it is called in some passages), which is the initial experience of being filled with the Spirit. Concerning this, the apostles expected every believer to have a clear testimony as to whether he had received the Spirit or not (See *Acts 19:2 & Galatians 3:2*).

But in *Ephesians 5:18*, Paul exhorted the Ephesian Christians (who had already been baptized in the Spirit) to “*be being filled with the Spirit*” (literal translation) – in other words, to be filled with the Spirit continuously. Those who walk in the Spirit in this *continuous* fullness alone can be referred to as men and women “*full of the Spirit*”. But this is something for others to notice, *not for us to testify to*. When Moses' face shone with the glory of God, others saw it, but he himself was ignorant of it (*Exodus 34:29, 30*).

To be full of the Spirit is to be full of the Spirit of Christ; and it is by the fruit of Christ-likeness in our character that others will know that we are Spirit-filled. There is no need for us to testify concerning this, for our life will speak louder than our words.

Paul's Example

There is perhaps no clearer description of the Spirit-filled life than in Paul's statement in *Galatians 2:20*, "I am crucified with Christ. It is no longer I but Christ that lives in me." For what is the purpose of the fullness of the Spirit if not to reproduce the life of Jesus in us? And so the measure in which our self-life is crucified and the Christ-life manifested in us, is the true measure of our being full of the Holy Spirit.

Paul told the Galatian Christians, "Brethren, I beseech you, be as *I am*" (*Galatians 4:12*). He was one who could ask others to follow his example. He did not have to say, "Don't look at me, but look at Christ." He repeatedly urged others to look at the example of his own life and to follow him as he followed Christ (See *1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1; Philipians 3:17*). He had such a satisfying Christian experience, that even when in chains, he could tell King Agrippa, "In spite of all that you have in the world, O king,

I only wish that you could be as *I am* (spiritually)" (*Acts 26:29*). He was not boasting, for he said elsewhere, "*By the grace of God, I am what I am*" (*1 Corinthians 15:10*).

Let us then look at the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul to see some of the characteristics of the Christ-life. We shall consider eight passages from Scripture where Paul describes his life and service, using this very same phrase, "*I am*".

We shall look first at the characteristics of Spirit-filled *service* and then at the characteristics of the Spirit-filled *life*.

Spirit-Filled Service

There are four things that I would like to mention concerning Spirit-filled service, from the words of the Apostle Paul.

A Love-Slave

First of all, Spirit-filled service is *the service of a love-slave*. In *Acts 27:23*, Paul says, "...the God *whom I am* and whom I serve". He was a love-slave of his God. He retained no right to his own life. He had given everything to his Master.

The only proper basis for our consecration is recognizing the fact that we belong wholly to God in the first place. Giving ourselves to God

out of *gratitude* for what He has done for us, though good in itself, is not the true *basis* for Christian consecration. Love for Christ can be the impelling *motive* in our service for the Lord. But the *basis* on which we should dedicate our lives to God, is the fact that He has *purchased* us on the cross. We are therefore now God's own property, and have no right to ourselves. When slaves served their masters in olden times, it was not primarily because they loved their masters, but because they were their master's property!

And so, when a person gives his entire life to God, he is not doing God a great favour. No! He is only returning to God what he had stolen from Him. If I were to steal a man's money and later, convicted of my sin, were to return it to him, I would certainly not be doing that man a favour. I would go to him as a repentant thief. And that is the only proper attitude in which we can approach God when we come to give our lives to Him. God has purchased us. When we recognize that, we arrive at the only proper *basis* for consecration.

Paul was a love-slave of the Lord. Like the Hebrew slave, who could go free in the seventh year of his service, but chose to continue in that service because he loved his master (*Exodus 21:1-6*), Paul served his Lord. He was not a hired servant who worked for wages, but one

who served without any rights of his own. The service of a love-slave has been beautifully summed up by someone in the following poem:

*"I'm but a slave!
I have no freedom of my own;
I cannot choose the smallest thing –
Nor e'en my way.*

*I'm a slave!
Kept to do the bidding of my Master –
He can call me night or day.
Were I a servant, I could claim wages –
Freedom sometimes, anyway.*

*But I was **bought** –
Blood was the price my Master paid for me,
And I am now His slave –
And evermore will be.*

*He takes here, He takes me there,
He tells me what to do;
I just obey, that's all –
I trust Him too!"*

This is what it means to be a love-slave.

God is looking for those who are so yielded to Him, that they will look to Him always to see what *He* wants them to do – and not busy doing

what *they feel* they should do for God. A slave does not go around doing whatever he feels like. No. The slave asks his master, “Master, what do *you* want me to do?” And he does what he is told. The Bible says, “The most important thing about a servant is that he does *just what his master tells him to*” (1 Corinthians 4:2 - LB).

As someone has put it so beautifully, this is the type of man the Lord is looking for:

*“I’m seeking for one who will wait and watch
For My beckoning Hand, My eye;
Who will work in My manner, the work I give,
And the work I give not, pass by.
And oh the joy that is brought to Me
When one such as this I can find,
A man who will do all My will –
Who is set To study His Master’s mind.”*

“I sought for a man,” the Lord once said, “but I found none” (Ezekiel 22:30). He is looking for love-slaves today. But He finds so few.

Evangelistic Passion – Not Emotional Excitement

Secondly, Spirit-filled service, is *a service that recognizes its debt to others*. Paul said, “*I am a debtor* to the Greeks (civilized) and to the barbarians (uncivilized)” (Romans 1:14). God

has given us a treasure to share with the world. We are like post-office employees who have been entrusted with a large amount of money to be given to various people as money-orders. Such an employee remains in debt to those others until he has finished paying off to each one his due. He may have thousands of dollars with him, but not one cent of it is his. He is a debtor to many.

The Apostle recognized a similar debt when God entrusted him with the message of the gospel. He knew it had to be given out. And he also knew that he would remain in debt to others until he had given them the message of salvation. After twenty-five years spent in preaching the good news, Paul still says, “I am a debtor,” and he tells the Roman Christians that he is ready to come to Rome to clear his debt to the people of Rome. Notice the three “*I am*”s of Paul in Romans 1:14–16: “*I am* a debtor ... *I am* ready ... *I am* not ashamed to preach the gospel”.

Spirit-filled service is outgoing. Recognizing its debt to others, it is always ready to go and discharge that debt. The evidence of the Spirit’s fullness and the beauty of the Christ-life are seen not in thrilling emotional experiences but in a passion in the heart that says (as Mrs. F.C. Durham has so wonderfully put it):

*“I am Thy slave, Thy bondsman; nevermore
Will I be free from this fierce urge within,
To spread from race to race, and shore to shore
The joyful news of pardon for man’s sin.*

*Give me the souls of men, or else I die,
Give me the love that counteth not the cost,
Give me that faith all barriers to defy,
Give me the joy of bringing home the lost.”*

Spirit-filled service has an evangelistic passion and is perpetually outgoing. It is concerned with the needs of others and not its own satisfaction. Christ Himself never once sought His own satisfaction (*Romans 15:3*).

It needs to be emphasized in our day that the Spirit’s fullness and His gifts are *not* given for our emotional satisfaction. Much less are they given for *exhibition*. “Exhibitionism”, A.W. Tozer has said, “is common to the *kindergarten!*”. God wants us to be spiritually mature, and when we are, our passion will be *neither emotionalism nor exhibitionism but evangelism*.

In his book, *The Spirit of Holiness*, E.L. Cattell mentions some of the perils of emotionalism – seeking emotional excitement instead of God, an adverse witness, wasted energy and false holiness.

Those who major on emotionalism will usually consider the Holy Spirit to be present in a meeting only when the emotional fervour of the singing and praying reaches a certain pitch and the noise reaches a certain decibel level! This is living by *feelings* and not by faith. It is worshipping the emotions instead of God. God dwells in our spirit, not in our emotions.

Emotionalism can also hinder our testimony to the world around us. Paul warns us that unbelievers coming into an *emotional* church meeting (where everyone is “speaking in tongues”) will consider all of them to be mad (*1 Corinthians 14:23*). God is a God of order, not of confusion (*1 Corinthians 14:33*). Emotional Christians dub others as unspiritual just because those others don’t accept their frenzied behaviour as manifestations of the Holy Spirit. “Grace accepts torture”, says Cattell, “but it never tortures others”!!

Emotionalism also becomes a substitute for service very often. Instead of helping others, we can merely keep enjoying our “emotional highs” in the meetings! Our energies must be directed toward “going around doing good and delivering people from the bondage of Satan” as Jesus did, when he was filled with the Holy Spirit (*Acts 10:38*) – and not to satisfying our emotions.

Counterfeit emotional “thrills” can also deceive us about our spiritual state. If you have offended your wife or some other person, God will want you to apologize to her/him first before fellowship with God can be restored. But Satan can give you such a nice feeling in a high-pitched emotional meeting or in a “*release in tongues*” that he can deceive you into believing that you are in communion with God, when you cannot be, for the main issue has not been settled. It may be more exciting to speak in tongues. But God expects you to take the humiliating step of asking forgiveness from the wounded person first. Otherwise Satan has fooled you with an *illusive holiness*.

I am not devaluing our emotions or the genuine gift of tongues. God has created our emotions and He doesn’t want us to be like dead stones. He is also the One Who gave the church the gift of tongues and there is a place for that too. But let us never forget that Spirit-filled service is always *outgoing*, thinking of its debt to *others*, and not just satisfying itself with experiences in the emotional realm.

We must also remember two important facts:

1. Any experience received in an emotionally tense meeting may have been self-induced, and not from God at all.

2. Any experience that makes a person lose control of himself cannot be from the Holy Spirit, for the fruit of the Spirit is *self-control* (*Galatians 5:22, 23*).

God does not want us to live depending on our *feelings*. He wants us to live by *faith*. This is why God sometimes allows us to feel spiritually dry. Such feelings of dryness are not *always* an indication of sin in our life. They are often God’s attempts to shake us out of our dependence on feelings.

We need to walk carefully in these days, for the Devil is leading many astray through counterfeit gifts and an over-emphasis on emotions. If we want to be delivered from Satan’s snares, let us remember that the beauty of the Christ-life is seen in a life that seeks to bless others. Jesus came from heaven to earth not seeking anything for Himself, but only to bless *others*.

Human Insufficiency

Thirdly, Spirit-filled service is *a service that is conscious of human insufficiency*. Notice Paul’s words in *2 Corinthians 10:1*, “*I am base among you*” – or, in other words, “*I don’t have an impressive personality.*”

Tradition tells us that the Apostle Paul was only 4 feet 10 inches in height and bald. He had a hooked nose and he was probably beset by an eye-disease. He obviously did not have a movie-star-like personality. The success of his labours did not depend on any human factor, for there was nothing impressive about his appearance or his speech.

Concerning his preaching, Paul writes to the Corinthians, “I was with you in fear and much trembling” (*1 Corinthians 2:3*). When he preached, he felt conscious of his weakness, rather than of the power of God flowing through him. This is Spirit-filled service – for remember, that a church was established in heathen Corinth as a result of Paul’s preaching.

When the Spirit of God speaks through a man, the man himself is not usually conscious of being God’s mouthpiece. I’m always wary of those folk who are so sure, when they stand in the pulpit, that God is speaking through them (and who preface their pronouncements with a “*Thus saith the Lord...*”). My experience with such people has been that God has never spoken through them at all. They’ve just had conceited ideas of being prophetic voices. The man through whom God speaks is usually not conscious of that fact at all. The Apostle Paul says in one of his writings, “*I think I am giving*

you counsel from God’s Spirit when I say this” (*1 Corinthians 7:40* - LB). He was not sure whether God was speaking through him. Yet we know that it was God speaking through Paul, for God has included it in inspired Scripture. But Paul himself was unaware of it.

Yes, Spirit-filled service is one that is conscious of *human insufficiency*. As Paul says, “When I am *weak*, then I am *strong*” (*2 Corinthians 12:10*). The Spirit-filled servant of God goes again and again to God, like the man in the parable, saying, “I have nothing to give others. Please give me the living bread” (*Luke 11:5–8*). The Lord’s servant is perpetually conscious of his own insufficiency.

Let us not have any mistaken ideas of Spirit-filled service. It has no great awareness of God’s power, but on the contrary of fear and uncertainty. It is only long after the labours are all over that, on looking back, there will be the assurance that God did indeed work through us.

Fulfilling Our Calling

Fourthly, Spirit-filled service is *a service that fulfils God’s specific calling*. In *Colossians 1:23, 25*, Paul says, “*I am made a minister*”, and in *1 Timothy 2:7*, “*I am ordained an apostle*”. Paul had been ordained by the nail-pierced hands of

his Saviour, and not by any man. It was God Who had called Paul to be an apostle. This calling, he says in *Colossians 1:25*, was *given* to him. It was God's *gift* – not something that he had achieved or earned. He also says in the same verse that this calling was given to him to serve *others*. It was a stewardship entrusted to him by God for the work of building up the church.

God has a specific calling for each of us. It is futile asking God to make us into something that He has not called us to be – for the Holy Spirit decides what gift each of us should have. Paul was called to be an apostle. But not everyone has such a calling. What we *do* need to seek God's face for, is *power* to do that which *He has called us to do*. "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you fulfil it," was Paul's advice to Archippus (*Colossians 4:17*).

God does not put square pegs into round holes. He knows what His church needs at a particular time in a particular place, and He prepares each of us, (if we are submissive) for a specific task – which may be quite different from what we ourselves want to do. "Is everyone an apostle? Of course not. Is everyone a preacher? No. Are all teachers? Does everyone have the power to do miracles? Can everyone heal the sick? Of course not. Does God give all of

us the ability to speak in languages we've never learned [tongues]? ... No" (*1 Corinthians 12:29, 30* - LB). But God has placed each of these gifts in the Body of Christ. The important thing is for us to recognize our gift and calling – and to exercise that gift and fulfil that calling. Spirit-filled service is service that fulfils *that specific calling* which God gives us.

If there is one gift that the New Testament specifically encourages us to seek, it is the gift of *prophecy* (*1 Corinthians 14:39*). This is perhaps the most needed gift in the church today. A prophetic ministry is one that edifies (strengthens and builds-up), exhorts (rebukes and challenges) and consoles (comforts and encourages) (*1 Corinthians 14:3*). We need to pray that God will give us prophets in our churches, who will speak the truth of God, without fear or favour – men of a different calibre from the professional religious scribes, who are more interested in their salary, status and popularity.

May the Lord help each of us to seek His face earnestly to find out what our calling is.

The Spirit-Filled Life

Let us look at four characteristics of the Spirit-filled life – again from the life of the Apostle Paul.

Perfect Contentment

The Spirit-filled life is, first of all, a life of perfect contentment. In *Philippians 4:11*, Paul says, “In whatever state I am, *I am content.*” And such contentment brings with it fullness of joy and peace. Hence Paul speaks of joy and peace in verses 4 & 7 of the same chapter.

We can praise God only when we are perfectly content with all His dealings with us. If we believe in a God who is sovereign and Who can therefore make everything that befalls us work together for our good, (*Romans 8:28*) then we can be truly content in all circumstances. Then we can praise the Lord, like Habakkuk, even when the trees in our garden don’t bear fruit, when our flock dies and when we have suffered heavy financial loss – or in any situation (*Habakkuk 3:17, 18*). *Ephesians 5:18–20* indicates that the result of the infilling of the Holy Spirit is an outflow of praise to God.

The Apostle Paul could rejoice even when he was locked up in prison, with his feet in stocks (*Acts 16:25*). Even there, he was content and found nothing to complain about. This is one of the first marks of the Spirit-filled life. When murmuring is found in a Christian, it is an indication that he, like the Israelites who murmured against God in the wilderness has still not entered the promised land of victory.

Growth in Holiness

Secondly, the Spirit-filled life is *a life of growth in holiness*. As a man’s own life increases in holiness so does his consciousness of the absolute holiness of God. The two go together. In fact, the latter is one of the tests of whether a person really has the former.

Twenty-five years after his conversion, Paul says, “*I am the least of the **apostles***” (*1 Corinthians 15:9*). Five years subsequently, he says, “*I am less than the least of all the **saints***” (*Ephesians 3:8*). Still a year later he says, “*I am* (notice, it is not “I was” but “*I am*”) *the chief of **sinners***” (*1 Timothy 1:15*).

Do you see his progression in holiness in those statements?

The closer Paul walked with God, the more he was conscious of the corruption and wickedness of his flesh. He recognized that no good thing could be found in his flesh (*Romans 7:18*). In *Ezekiel 36:26, 27, 31*, God says, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you ... *Then you will loathe yourselves* for all the evils you did.” There we see that one proof that we have got a new heart from God is that we loathe ourselves. Only a man who hates and detests his flesh will be able to fulfil the command in *Philippians 2:3* to “*esteem others*

as more important” than himself. Having seen his own corruption, he will no longer despise anyone else.

He will also be ready to confess failure immediately and will be willing to call sin, sin. The Spirit-filled man does not merely seek to give others *an impression* that he is growing in holiness, but will *actually* be doing so. He will not testify of *experiences* that supposedly made him holy, or try to convince others of his *theology* of sanctification. He will have such holiness in his life that others will come to him, of their own accord, and ask him the secret of his life. He will have what J.B. Phillips translates as, “*the holiness which is no illusion*” (Ephesians 4:24).

It makes no difference what our doctrine of holiness is. True holiness comes only to the man who seeks after it with all his heart, and not to the one who merely has the correct teaching in his head.

There have been godly men in past centuries (like John Fletcher) whose understanding of the doctrine of holiness led them to believe that they were ‘*entirely sanctified*’ and who called their unconscious sins ‘*mistakes*’. There have been other godly men (like David Brainerd) who called their unconscious sins ‘*sins*’, and who bemoaned their sinfulness and their lack of devotion to God constantly – throughout

their earthly lives. But both these groups of men may have been equally saintly *in God’s eyes*, despite the radical difference in the way they evaluated their own lives. Their different temperaments and their differing understandings of the doctrine of sanctification accounted for their differing estimate of their own hearts. The secret of holiness is discovered not through a study of Greek words and tenses in the New Testament but through a wholehearted and sincere desire to please God. God looks at our hearts, not at our brains!

In any case, any growth in holiness, will always be accompanied, as it was with Paul, by an increasing awareness of one’s own sinfulness in the sight of God.

A Crucified Life

Thirdly, the Spirit-filled life is *a life that is crucified*. Paul said, “*I am crucified with Christ*” (Galatians 2:20). We have already seen something of the meaning of the cross in the last two chapters. The way of the cross is the way of the fullness of the Spirit. The Spirit will always lead us like He led Jesus to the cross. The Spirit and the cross are inseparable.

The cross is a symbol of *weakness, shame and death*. The Apostle Paul had fears, perplexities,

sorrows and tears in his life (See *2 Corinthians 1:8; 4:8; 6:10; 7:5*). He was considered a fool and a fanatic. He was often treated like dirt and garbage by others (*1 Corinthians 4:13*). All this is not incongruous with the Spirit's fullness. On the contrary, the Spirit-filled man will find God leading him farther and farther, down the pathway of humiliation and death to himself.

The Spirit-filled man is one who does not care for the honour of men. He accepts humiliation and reproach gladly. He glories in nothing but the cross (*Galatians 6:14*). He does not glory in his gifts or abilities or even his deeper life experiences. He glories only in dying to himself perpetually.

The cross is also the symbol of Divine love. God's love for man was manifested in God dying on a cross for men. Such love characterizes the Spirit-filled man as well. Between him and every other person, there is a cross on which he dies to himself in order to love the other. This is the real meaning of love.

Watchman Nee tells the story of two Christian farmers in China who had their fields halfway up a hill and who would get up early in the morning and water their fields. Some other farmers, whose fields were lower down the hill, came one night and dug a hole in the irrigation channels of the upper fields and let all the water flow down

to their fields. This happened for seven nights in succession and the two Christians wondered what to do. They finally decided that as believers they would show the other farmers the love of Christ. And so they got up the next morning and watered the fields of those farmers first, and then watered their own. They put a cross between them and the other farmers and died to their own rights on it. After they did this for two or three days, the non-Christian farmers called to apologize and said, "If this is Christianity, then we want to hear more about it."

Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit came upon His disciples, they would receive power to be His witnesses. The word "witness" in the original Greek, is "*martus*", (which is translated as "martyr" in *Acts 22:20* and in *Revelation 2:13* and *17:6*). So the literal meaning of *Acts 1:8*, is that when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, they would receive power to be martyrs – martyrs, not just in the sense of dying once on a stake, but martyrs who would die to themselves *daily*. And so, a Spirit-filled witness is one who lives a crucified life.

Continuous Enlargement

Fourthly, the Spirit-filled life is *a life that is continuously seeking greater degrees of fullness.*

“*I am pressing on,*” says Paul, nearly thirty years after his conversion, and as he was drawing to the end of his life (*Philippians 3:14*). He still has not attained. He is seeking a still greater degree of the fullness of the Spirit of God in his life, and is therefore straining every spiritual muscle toward this goal.

“I am *not* perfect (complete),” he says in *Philippians 3:12*. But in verse 15, he seems to say the exact opposite: “Let us who *are* perfect (complete) be thus minded.” This is the paradox of the Spirit-filled life – complete, and yet not complete; in other words, full and yet desiring a greater degree of fullness.

The Spirit-filled state is not a static one. There are greater and greater degrees of fullness. The Bible says that the Holy Spirit leads us from one degree of glory to another (*2 Corinthians 3:18*) – or, in other words, from one degree of fullness to another. A cup can be full of water; so can a bucket; so can a tank and so can a river. But there is a vast difference between the fullness of a cup and the fullness of a river.

The newborn convert can be filled with the Spirit immediately on conversion. The Apostle Paul too was a Spirit-filled man at the end of his life. But there is a vast difference between the fullness of the newborn convert and the fullness

of the mature Apostle. The former is like a full cup whereas the latter was like a full river.

The Holy Spirit is constantly seeking to enlarge our capacity, so that He can fill us to a greater degree. This is where the cross comes in. There can be no enlargement in our lives if we avoid the pathway of the cross. This is why the Corinthians Christians were so shallow. They gloried in gifts and ignored the cross. And so Paul exhorts them again and again in his two epistles, to accept the cross in their lives. He exhorts them to be enlarged thereby (*2 Corinthians 6:13*).

If we accept the cross consistently in our lives, we shall find our cup becoming a bucket, our bucket becoming a tank, our tank becoming a river and the river becoming many rivers. At each stage, as our capacity enlarges, we will need to be filled again. Thus will be fulfilled in us the promise of the Lord Jesus,

“Rivers of living water shall flow from the inmost being of anyone who believes in me (He was speaking of the Holy Spirit)”
(John 7:38, 39 - LB).

This also explains why Paul exhorts the Ephesian Christians to “be continuously being filled with the Spirit” (*Ephesians 5:18*). Paul

obviously never believed in a once-for-all experience of being filled with the Spirit. What he is referring to here is a continuous enlargement of capacity for greater degrees of fullness.

Paul himself accepted the cross always. He says in *2 Corinthians 4:10*, “Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body [in ever-increasing degree].” One aspect of the cross that he accepted was the disciplining of his bodily appetites. The fullness of the Spirit is never a substitute for discipline and hard work. Paul still needed to pommel his body and bring it into subjection. He says,

“Like an athlete I punish my body, treating it roughly, training it to do what it should, not what it wants to” (*1 Corinthians 9:27* - LB).

He disciplined his eyes in what they read and looked at, his ears in what they listened to, and his tongue in what it spoke. He disciplined his life in every area. Thus he was enlarged.

Thank God for the *crises* He gives us in our lives. But let us not forget that every crisis must lead to a *process*. Christ is not only the *Door*, He is also the *Way*. If we enter in through the narrow *gate*, we have to walk the narrow *way*.

Let us never be guilty of emphasizing the *crisis* to the exclusion of the *process*. The new birth is a crisis, but spiritual life in the *present* tense is the important thing, not just the memory of a date in the past. Some are unable to remember the date when the crisis of the new birth took place. But we don't say that a man is dead merely because he can't remember his birthday! And yet, alas, to some Christians, the testimony of an experience is the only test of life!

In relation to the fullness of the Spirit too, the important thing is the present tense reality of it, manifested in Christlike living and service. The memory of an experience in the past, however wonderful that may have been, is, by itself, of no avail.

God is looking for men and women who will never be content with mere experiences and “blessings,” but who will take up the cross daily and follow Jesus and thus manifest in their lives and in their service the reality of those words, “It is no longer I, but Christ that lives in me.” This, and this alone is the Spirit-filled life.

*“Not I but Christ be honoured, loved, exalted,
Not I but Christ be seen, be known, be heard;
Not I but Christ in ev'ry look and action,
Not I but Christ in ev'ry thought and word*

Beauty for Ashes

*Oh to be saved from myself, dear Lord,
Oh to be lost in Thee,
Oh that it may be no more I
But Christ that lives in me.” (Selected)*

Amen and Amen.

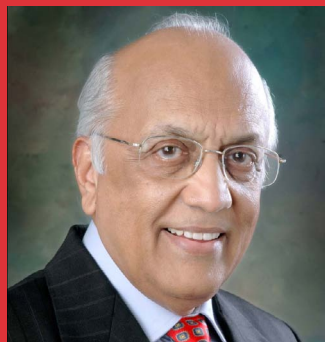
About the Book

God had a great and glorious purpose for man when He created him. Of all created beings, man alone was created with the capacity to share in God's life and to partake of the Divine nature. But he could enjoy this privilege only as he voluntarily chose to live a life centred in God.

God's purpose for man did not change when Adam fell. The coming of Christ into the world was in order that we might be delivered from this self-centred life that we have inherited, and once again have the opportunity to partake of the tree of life. This is the abundant life that Christ offers us.

Isaiah had prophesied that Christ, when He came, would set people free from bondage. Man is bound not only by the Devil but also by his self-life. Christ came to set us free from both. Isaiah said that Christ would give those he liberated, **beauty** to replace their **ashes**. Ashes are a most appropriate symbol of the self-life – picturing its ugliness and its uselessness. Christ offers to give us the beauty of His own life to replace the ashes of our self-life. What a privilege! Yet many Christians do not enjoy this fully. Why not?

How can we enjoy it? That is the subject of this book. Read on...



Zac Poonen was formerly an officer in the Indian Navy. He has been engaged in a church-planting ministry in India and other countries since 1975. He ministers at deeper life conferences in many lands. He and his wife Annie, live in Bangalore, South India. They have four married sons, who, along with their wives, are also following the Lord.