

To the members of St Paul's Sherborne
whose prayers make a difference

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FAITH, WORD and SPIRIT



*Forty days of
Biblical reflections*

LENT 2020

For individual or group use

FAITH, WORD AND SPIRIT

40 reflections for Lent 2020

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7:4 ANTICIPATION

Through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. *Galatians 5:5*

In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. *2 Peter 3:13*

One of the disciplines I imposed upon myself as a teacher was not to look forward to the end of term, so that it came as a delightful surprise. Of course I had to endure the old jibe, 'You teachers are only in it for the holidays.' My reply was, 'Stand in front of a class for a week then say that again.'

Peter's quotation about the new heaven and new earth comes from the last pages of Isaiah, in which the prophet anticipates the joy and rejoicing there is going to be in the new Jerusalem, God's holy mountain. It won't be like the former times when there was weeping and crying; those times will be forgotten. There will be total 'rightness' – everything is going to be all right.

Of course, everything is not all right yet. We are still waiting, and sometimes this requires a lot of faith and hope. But we have two allies: the promises of God scattered throughout the Bible, and the assurances given us by the Holy Spirit in our hearts. If we feed ourselves eagerly and often from these sources, we will be less prone to depression or despair.

C S Lewis captures this anticipation beautifully in the final pages of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Aslan says to the children, 'You do not yet look as happy as I mean you to be. Have you not guessed?' The children's hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them. 'The term is over; the holidays have begun,' says the Lion. 'The dream is ended; this is the morning.'

Lord, sometimes life on earth seems to be all there is, a little good and a lot of evil. But you said, 'Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness' (Matthew 6:33). Stir up my spirit with your Spirit, and my faith with your words. Help me to be a looker forward, and take away my fear.

7:3 TRANSFORMATION

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

Romans 8:11

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Philippians

3:20-21

Stanley Spencer's famous painting 'Cookham Resurrection' shows villagers climbing out of their graves on the Last Day, unchanged from their former lives. But the 'transforming of our earthly bodies' that Paul describes is a much more radical makeover: 'the body that is sown is perishable, inglorious, frail, physical; it is raised imperishable, glorious, mighty, spiritual' (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

Nature provides a classic analogy in caterpillars that turn into butterflies. Your caterpillar is alive, sure, but it has no conception of the magnificent creature to come. It is earthbound, sluggish and comparatively dull in appearance. Then it enters its cocoon and dies to its former existence; it undergoes a total metamorphosis and emerges as a multicoloured, versatile citizen of the air, with a range of abilities far beyond its previous self. It is a citizen of the skies.

God's Spirit we already have living in us, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, generates this transformation. No amount of human mental or moral energy can do it. Yes, by faith in Christ we are already inheritors of new life, but 'you ain't seen nothing yet.' Christ's return, guaranteed by his word, will summon us out of our cocoons, and the Spirit's resurrecting work will be complete.

'Now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure' (1 John 3:2-3). There is still a great deal to be done! But the end result is going to be worth everything.

WEEK 5: Wisdom and strength

- 5:1 There's a war on!
- 5:2 Kept safe
- 5:3 Guidance
- 5:4 Specific leading
- 5:5 Power to go on
- 5:6 Prayer from weakness

WEEK 6: The fruit of the Spirit

- 6:1 Love
- 6:2 Joy
- 6:3 Peace
- 6:4 Patience
- 6:5 Self-control
- 6:6 Filled

WEEK 7: Pressing ahead

- 7:1 Have started, will finish
- 7:2 Mission
- 7:3 Transformation
- 7:4 Anticipation

The reflections are based on two (or three) short passages from the Bible, one of which mentions the Spirit directly, while the other doesn't but is similar in theme. Each reflection ends with a prayerful meditation.

Scripture quotations are normally taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (Anglicised edition) copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica (formerly International Bible Society).

1:1 I WILL COME IN

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

Revelation 3:20

Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.

Acts 2:38-39

The picture of Jesus standing outside the door knocking and calling may well have been central to our taking a decisive initial step in asking Christ into our lives. It is more tangible and immediate than ‘receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.’ Yet both passages describe the same move of God, whether for a group of people or an individual.

There is a call to be answered. The Lord God is making himself heard in distinct and definite words, breaking in from outside. This is how the Spirit works. The alarm clock breaks into my slumber, jerking me awake. I have to do something about it.

There is an attitude to be abandoned. I thought I didn’t need God, Jesus was irrelevant to me, and ‘forgiveness of sins’ meant admitting I had gone wrong. What, me? As for ‘repentance’, that was all too holy and religious. Now, I realise that some kind of U-turn is vital. To go any farther down the road I’m on is to court disaster.

There is a Person to reckon with. Jesus has stepped out of a book, out of history, out of church controversy, to come where I am. He loved me and died for me. He came through to the other side of death to find me. He holds the keys of the kingdom. Do I want him?

There is a response to be made. It is either ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘wait’. There’s a meal on the table. While I’m waiting it could get lukewarm and then cold. Hold on – who is the guest, and who is the host?

I realise the Spirit is no less than Jesus himself. I thought the door handle was on my side, but you have been working away on the inside too. I trust your promise to come in, whatever that means. Thank you!

7:2 MISSION

Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’

John 20:21-22

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.

Mark 16:15

We are two thousand years down the line from when these words were spoken by our Lord, but they have the same relevance as they had then. They are addressed, not to a special few, but to the whole Church. They are not so much a three-line whip as an invitation to find out what God is doing and join in.

Jesus compared the Church to ‘salt’ (which preserves meat from corruption and makes food taste more interesting) and ‘light’ (like a hill-top town winking invitingly to lost or weary travellers). It is not that any given church or group of believers has these qualities in itself; it describes how the Holy Spirit is going to guide, equip and enable them to carry out God’s unique work of bringing in the new heavens and the new earth.

Is this a ‘Mission Impossible’? Paul asks, ‘Who is equal to such a task?’ and concludes ‘Not that we are competent in ourselves, but our competence comes from God’ (2 Corinthians 2:16, 3:5). If God is going to do the sending, he must provide the sufficiency. This too is Holy Spirit territory, for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10), and his work is ongoing.

We may need to revise our ideas about why the universal Church, why my local church has come into being. In sea-going terms, it is not so much a luxury cruise ship as a lifeboat. There are people struggling in the waves out there. Everyone on board has their allocated task. But do we see the urgency?

Show me, Lord, how I can play a part in your ongoing work of seeking and saving the lost, remembering how I too have been pulled on board out of the waters.

7:1 HAVE STARTED, WILL FINISH

The one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

2 Corinthians 5:5

Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Philippians 1:6

'I've started, so I'll finish' is the signature phrase of Magnus Magnusson in *Mastermind*, the TV brains contest. He said it whenever the time ran out on his question to a contestant. It is also God's promise to every struggling believer: he has started the 'good work' of making us like Christ, and he will make sure it is completed by the time Jesus returns to gather his people to himself.

This finishing power isn't the product of my willpower or spiritual gungho, it is the unique specialism of the Holy Spirit. So when Paul assures the little church at Philippi that they won't die out like a guttering candle, he is staking everything on the Spirit, even though he doesn't refer to him by name.

When I buy a gadget for home use, it comes with a 'guarantee' which promises free maintenance and repairs for a certain time, after which I'll have to arrange things at my own expense. Not so with the Lord's work: it's guaranteed for as long as it takes.

So do I just sit back and enjoy the attentions of the Spirit like Wooster enjoying the ministrations of Jeeves? No way! Paul says, 'Not that I have already obtained all this, or have arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me' (Philippians 3:12). The enemy of prayer is complacency, thinking I've arrived, and forgetting my part in 'taking hold' of the work of the Spirit in strengthening my relationship with Christ.

If I've got someone who 'is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy' (Jude 24), am I energetically laying hold of his promise to finish what he's started?

1:2 HOW WE KNOW

On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

John 14:20

If what you have heard from the beginning remains in you, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. *1 John 2:24*

This is how we know he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us.

1 John 3:24

How can I be absolutely sure that Jesus lives in me? Given the inconsistent nature of my personal life, might he not have tiptoed away without my knowing? Next question: if I can indeed be sure of his dwelling in me, because of his promise to do so (Revelation 3:20), should I have a steady awareness of his presence with me?

We are up against human psychology here. Some of us are naturally restless, others more contemplative. Some environments are peaceful, others, such as a family home, are less so. How can we train ourselves to realise his presence whatever our surroundings?

Consider an analogue watch (you may even be wearing one). Its face is never still, reminding us that time is passing. Inside it is a mechanism which though moving is at complete rest. Little cogwheels dovetail with each other to produce dynamic equilibrium. One cog in another, each doing its work, no stress, no strain.

Now of course we are people, not machines – but imagine three cogwheels labelled 'Spirit', 'Word' and 'Faith', driving our inner spiritual life. The Holy Spirit represents the presence of God the Father and Jesus the Son in our hearts. The Word is the apostolic teaching we have heard from the start, always giving us more to grasp and integrate into our thinking and practice. Spirit and Word mesh with our faith and move us to realise the power of the indwelling Lord – no matter what's going on in and around us.

'If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you' (John 15:7). This is a good prayer to begin with: that I may know the reality of your abiding presence in me.

1:3 REBIRTH

He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Titus 3:5,6

You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

1 Peter 1:23

Why do many churchgoing Christians react so strongly against the idea of a second birth? Why is the term 'born-again Christian' such a turn-off? Partly, perhaps, because it has become synonymous with superficial or over-emotional conversion. Many of us are Christians now as a result of years and years of fluctuating believerdom which has coalesced into steady discipleship. It didn't happen all at once.

But that is to miss an important point, the very point Jesus makes to Nicodemus when he introduces the idea. We start our human lives as 'flesh', natural-born people. Flesh can't evolve into spirit, the capability for eternal life with God, except by the supernatural action of the Holy Spirit.

For me to make the transition from natural earthly life to eternal heavenly life, then, the life of God himself has got to switch on inside me. It isn't a life I can switch on all by myself. But at the same time I need to receive and believe the word of God which is part and parcel of the same operation. In fact the word of God seems to possess the same life giving power as the Spirit, as indicated by Jesus' parable of the Sower, when the seed burrows down into the earth and comes up as harvest crop. Only it isn't automatic. The soil too has something to do with a successful birth. There are mysteries here.

As I hear God's word, however it comes to me, I respond to it or reject it. If I receive it, it enters me as a thinking and willing person and lodges there, generating Spirit life within me. God knows when this happens, even if I don't.

If I have got this new life, it needs nurturing. Every day I need my spiritual 'breakfast' of word and Spirit. Otherwise the life withers and dies. The battle with the flesh continues. But we have a Divine ally.

6:6 FILLED

Be filled with the Spirit.

Ephesians 5:18

Filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:11

Jesus promised his disciples that they would be fruitful. Like the branches of a vine, they would naturally bear tasty and attractive grapes – as long as they stayed in vital contact with the parent tree (John 15:1ff). Their lives would have a Jesus character and their prayers would be heard and answered. This would bring praise to his Father as the world discovered what God was really like.

We don't have to grow this fruit by our own efforts to be good. We grow it as he produces it in us. We don't have to feel suffused with Spirit coursing through our veins, either: to be filled with the Spirit isn't a special come-and-go experience we can only get at a big conference or through contact with a specially gifted individual. It is daily and continual.

It 'comes through Jesus Christ.' As he lives in me, and I talk to him, and he reminds me how much and how unreservedly he loves me, he replaces my half-loves and my half-gods with his own gentle and distinctive reign, and I begin to grow his kind of fruit.

What exactly is 'righteousness'? It is rightness. Before I met Christ I was wrongly aligned to God. He took my wrongness to the cross and exchanged it for his own perfectly aligned rightness (2 Corinthians 5:21). Now through the work of the Spirit he applies that work on the cross to my everyday life, realigning my character to his own.

Lord, I want to be like you, walk like you, talk like you. The Lion King in me. But do I want this in order to get some kind of power over others? To be known as a gifted leader, speaker, writer? 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45).

6:5 SELF-CONTROL

The fruit of the Spirit is self-control.

Galatians 5:23

The grace of God teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Titus 2:12-13

Esau couldn't change what he'd done. He was famished and faint after hunting, so when Jacob offered him a tasty dish of stew in return for his status as older twin, he joked 'What use is a birthright if I'm dead?' and went for the immediate gratification (Genesis 25:29-34; Hebrews 12:16-17). At a crucial moment, he lacked self-control.

Self-control is hard and painful, but it is necessary if we are to run the race set before us (Hebrews 12:1). We are to be like Olympic athletes who undergo a rigorous course of training; they do it in the uncertain hope of temporary earthly glory, but we do it in the certain hope of permanent heavenly glory (1 Corinthians 9:25).

The slogan 'No pain, no gain' can be twisted into excessive self-chastisement that has led some highly-motivated Christians into serious error. Our training should be carried out in dependence on the Holy Spirit and the grace of God. If physical self-denial is required, the best incentive isn't awarding ourselves points from a check-list, it's fixing our eyes on Jesus who endured the cross and calls us to share his eternal joy.

'Eyes on the prize, Violet!' cries the father of Roald Dahl's anti-heroine of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Her ultimate aim, of course, was total self-indulgence. In a sense, so is ours – as long as we realise where our best interests lie.

'Search me, O God, and know my heart; see if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting' (Psalm 139:23-24). Our trainer knows us through and through. He knows the best regime for me. Saying 'No' can be desperately hard, but when it's combined with saying 'Yes' to Jesus, I can begin to see things in perspective.

1:4 JESUS WITH US AND IN US

Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the world.

Matthew 28:20

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth. You know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

John 14:16-18

Jesus is teaching his bewildered followers about their future relationship with him through the Holy Spirit. He uses different words, names and images to put across this single, unbelievably wonderful fact: he may be going away, but he is coming back personally to be permanently with them, among them and in them.

It's nothing they have to strive for or 'be good enough' for – it is a joint present from himself and the Father. It is God gift-wrapped for us. A promise delivered as soon as it is received.

'Always' translates a phrase meaning literally 'all the days.' He is not with us just on Sundays, or even specially on Sundays. He comes with us into the days of the week, the working days, the grim days, the joy-filled days, daytime, night-time.

'Advocate' is a word used only by John, translating the Greek word *Paraclētos*. It means 'I'm on your side,' however bad things get or however much of a mess you make of things.

The Spirit isn't a strange God we have never met before and might be slightly cautious about asking on board – like a power-boat full of masked men with submachine guns. He is the Jesus we have seen in the Gospels, teaching, healing, showing compassion, dealing authoritatively with evil, correcting our misconceptions about God.

Lord Jesus, I can ask you into my life for the first time, and you will come as you have promised (Revelation 3:20). I can turn to you every day, and you will be there. Not just when I need help, but as a permanent Friend. Thank you!

1:5 TRUE FREEDOM

The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

2 Corinthians 3:17

If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

John 8:32, 34-35

Jesus said he had come to set people free (Luke 4:18), according to God's word in Isaiah and through the Spirit that was upon him. The Gospels are full of him doing this: releasing people from illness, blindness, unbelief, fear, lust, even from death itself. He isn't here any longer, but his Spirit continues his work. How?

He simply said to a woman who had been bent double for eighteen years: 'Woman, you are set free from your infirmity' (Luke 13:12). On this occasion he also put his hands on her, but there were other healings with just a word, sometimes at a considerable distance. One memorable evening they brought demon-possessed people to his door; he laid his hands on each one, and drove out the spirits with a word (Matthew 8:16, Luke 4:40).

So why isn't he continuing his freeing work today? Has his word somehow become disconnected from his Spirit? Paul, amazed that his Jewish friends can't see that Jesus is the Messiah, concludes that their minds are 'veiled' when the Scriptures are read. When word and Spirit operate together, veils are removed, shackles fall away, lives are released into freedom and joy. What is blindfolding our minds at the present time? Unbelief? A failure to ask for the Spirit?

Anywhere a church or someone 'holds to' Jesus' teaching, freedom results. This freedom isn't anarchy or chaos, it's the ordered life of sanity and creativity. The legion of devils departs, the chains are thrown off and another disciple sits at Jesus' feet, clothed and in their right mind. Must all this belong to the past?

'Your touch has still its ancient power, no word from you can fruitless fall; hear, in this solemn evening hour, and in your mercy heal us all.'

6:4 PATIENCE

The fruit of the Spirit is patience. *Galatians 5:22 NRSV*

So that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Hebrews 6:12 NRSV

'I wouldn't have the patience!' This was the standard response when I said I was a teacher. 'Well,' was my reply, 'nor did I, but you learn it in the end.' But what is patience, and how do you learn it?

Conventionally, it means not losing your rag, keeping a check on your irritation, being tolerant of the other person who is trying you to the utmost. In relation to circumstances, it means not allowing yourself to be thrown, being big enough to survive a few ups and downs, that kind of thing. Whatever.

That is human patience, and it's hard-won, but it only gets you so far. One of the Bible's words for 'patience' is *makrothumia*, 'big-heartedness' or 'great-spiritedness'. This is Divine patience, the fruit of the Spirit who is reproducing the Jesus character in us. With him we can go the second mile; without him we wouldn't make it halfway through the first. Paul writes out of his first-hand experience of the 'immense patience' of Christ Jesus in showing mercy to himself as 'the worst of sinners' (1 Timothy 1:16).

So am I in danger of becoming 'sluggish'? This word can be used to describe a slow or sleepy pupil, or an interlocutor who is hard of hearing. The idea in Hebrews (especially chapters 11-12) is that the Bible is full of examples of people who are 'big-hearted', and if we gird up the loins of our mind to study and follow them, we can achieve what they did and endure as they did. Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Samuel – and Jesus. Running the race with perseverance, fixing our eyes on them, above all on him.

So it's for him to produce his fruit in me, and it's for me to ransack his word for models, incitements to great-spiritedness. He met the worst that devils and humans could do. He called his betrayer 'Friend.' He forgave his crucifiers. He restored Simon Peter. Am I such a slow pupil?

6:3 PEACE

The fruit of the Spirit is peace.

Galatians 5:22

You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. Trust in the Lord for ever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal.

Isaiah 26:3-4

In 1911 they found the tent where Scott of the Antarctic and his two last companions had perished in terrible weather. One of them was Edward Wilson, the expedition doctor, who was known as Uncle Bill. A member of the search party reported: 'On his features were traces of a sweet smile, and he looked exactly as if he were about to awake from a sound sleep.' Captain Scott wrote to Mrs Wilson shortly before he died: 'In his eyes is a comfortable blue look of hope.'

How can someone remain serene and hopeful in the face of total loss and failure, indeed in the face of death itself? At such times you can't manufacture peacefulness. It isn't a quality you can summon up by emotional power or mental will. It comes from a deep and settled inner steadiness.

One of the items found in the tent was Wilson's pocket New Testament which he used to read by himself every morning. Yes, it had been important to reach the South Pole, even if they couldn't be the first; even more vital were his scientific studies and paintings from nature. But his supreme necessity was to stay in touch with his Rock, the eternal God in whom he trusted. This trust was fed from sources beyond himself: the word of God in his daily consciousness, and the Spirit of Christ at the heart of his being and doing.

I just wonder if I'm looking to the wrong things to give me peace. Circumstances, health, people's approval, music or literature, beautiful surroundings, the touch of a friend: all good things, yet which in themselves have no permanence. Even in my times of reading and prayer, do I reach out and deliberately fix my mind, not on the words alone, but on the Person who gives them meaning? 'On you, Lord.'

1:6 THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

Luke 4:18

You know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

John 14:17-18

The Lord is the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:17

Who or what, exactly, is the Holy Spirit? Is it some kind of power from God flowing through the universe? Or is he an actual Person? Is he the same as Jesus – or maybe just the influence of Jesus through his wonderful words and example?

When Jesus appears to his disciples after rising from the dead, they think he's a ghost (Luke 24:37). He replies, 'It is I myself!' On that occasion he gives them proof of his physical identity as the Jesus they knew and loved. It's the same with the Spirit. 'It is I myself.' Even though we can't see him, we believe in him as the same Jesus who walked the earth, and this gives us the same joy as we would have had if we'd been one of the disciples like Peter (1 Peter 1:8).

The key word 'anointed' links directly with the name of 'Christ', Jesus' title as Divine Lord. They aren't two different people being described. In Dostoevsky's great novel *The Idiot*, the leading figure, Prince Myshkin, is also called Leo Nikolayevitch. It takes a bit of working out if you missed it first time, but it becomes obvious after a while. You don't have to be an expert in Russian novels.

Similarly I don't have to be an expert theologian before I can understand about the Holy Spirit being Jesus in an invisible form. It isn't the assent of the mind that is difficult, it's the consent of the heart to Jesus being my Lord that I may have to wrestle with.

Lord, I so easily get bogged down in doubts about you. The Bible throws these terms around like spinning plates and I become bewildered. It's you I want. If having the Spirit is the same as having you, then give me the Spirit. That's all I ask.

‘As for me, this is my covenant with them,’ says the LORD. ‘My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words which I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants – from this time on and for ever,’ says the LORD.

Isaiah

59:21

The one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit.

John 3:34

The little circular pool had been formed by water dripping vertically through fifteen hundred feet of Grand Canyon rock. We were footsore and thirsty, and this water was pure and completely satisfying. It was a secret and almost sacred place which we were reluctant to leave.

The pair of verses above span the two parts of the Bible. They show with remarkable clarity how the heaven-sent gifts of word and Spirit centre directly on the person of Christ and so reach us today.

Like Mary of Bethany, we would abandon everything to listen to Christ. No wonder she was reluctant to leave her place at his feet (Luke 10:39). The words of God were Spirit dripping right down into her inner being, satisfying her, cleansing her through and through.

We need this secret place at the heart of God where he speaks to us. We can’t travel on without it. The alternative is to believe that he doesn’t speak to us, that even if he does we can’t understand him, so we are left to drink from our own stagnant pools.

God however loves us too much to stop communicating with us. All he asks is that we make time in our hasty lives to listen to his Son, who has been listening to his Father from eternity.

Lord, I choose to believe you can speak to me and to those who come after me. Without this certainty I’m lost. Without the reassurance and encouragement of your actual voice, I get upset and distracted by the noise around. I can’t go on without you.

The fruit of the Spirit is joy.

Galatians 5:22

Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive-crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the sheepfold and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.

Habakkuk 3:17-18

How dependent am I on material prosperity? Does my mood change according to my circumstances? If I’m honest, I’m like most people: when things are going well, when the weather is reasonable, when there is nothing particularly wrong with my health, it’s not very difficult to be cheerful and optimistic. But when things take a turn for the worse, the outlook changes and I’m a different person.

Then we meet someone like this farmer in Habakkuk. Everything has gone wrong, either through a series of misfortunes or owing to his own or another’s incompetence. He is staring ruin in the face. Yet he is impossibly cheerful! There he is out in the fields, with his coat-collar buttoned up against the icy wind, and he’s actually singing songs of praise.

His secret is that he’s discovered a source of joy independent of circumstances. His crops may have failed, but the Spirit is producing a crop within him directly supplied from the God he calls his Saviour. When he says ‘I will rejoice, I will be joyful,’ he’s not hopelessly gritting his teeth, he’s simply reminding himself that despite all appearances to the contrary, he’s ultimately in good hands.

Isaiah 12:3 says ‘With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.’ Wells of earthly joy can so easily dry up, but as Jesus pointed out to the Samaritan woman, he is able to offer the water of eternal life to all who come to him for it.

Help me to remember that joy isn’t a feeling, it’s an attitude. Feelings come and go, depending on my physical or psychological barometer; but the settled attitude of Spirit-sourced cheerfulness comes from trusting his word. May I make it my song today.

6:1 LOVE

The fruit of the Spirit is love.

Galatians 5:22

A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

John 13:34

Dear friends, let us love one another; for love comes from God.

Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

1 John 4:7

I'm meeting some of my family today, or maybe I've got to spend time with a person I find very difficult, so how can I feel the requisite love for them? With family it shouldn't be too difficult, but do I really love them as much as I should? Or I'm going to meet folk in church – how can I get the right level of *agapē*-love for all of them?

I shouldn't be working myself into a lather over this. I'm born of God, OK? This doesn't mean I'm a super-saint, it means Christ is in me by his Spirit. I don't need to feel a dramatic surge of love for everybody, I just need to ask him to do in and through me what I never could do by myself.

So why does Jesus say it's a new command, when it's been there for ages, 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18)? Well, it's new for two reasons: because Jesus himself has set a new level of loving, by laying down his life for his friends (including Pharisees and tax-collectors); and because he has come back from the dead and given us the Spirit to love our neighbour from the inside.

This love goes the second mile; it going involves praying for one's enemies, hugging lepers, reconciling staunch opponents, being patient with the circumcision party, coping with Eros-love, that kind of thing. Doing, saying and being what I can't but he can.

Maybe I've been subtly off track, as usual. I've been trying to do the right thing, selfless loving, but for the wrong reason (to get over a spiritual high-jump bar) and by the wrong means (by trying to manipulate my emotions). And the Spirit has been waiting patiently for me to ask him to do what he's there to do all along.

2:2 WORKING WORD

We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.

1 Thessalonians 2:13

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

1 Corinthians 2:4-5

When Paul walked into cities like Thessalonica or Corinth and started speaking, what did he expect to happen, and why? Can we expect the same thing to happen today?

Well, first and foremost he expected people to hear God himself speaking to them. Most travelling orators brought a mixture of brilliant ideas, rhetorical language and shrewd psychology, plus gifts of character and humour. Paul was different. He wasn't attractive as a personality or talented as a speaker. He saw himself as an ambassador, tasked with delivering God's message in words that God gave him, particularly the written words of Scripture.

Then he expected the Spirit to get to work. He wasn't just delivering a lecture, or explaining a complicated train of thought. As he spoke about who Jesus was and what he had done, the Holy Spirit would convict folk of their error and unbelief, would testify to the goodness and greatness of Christ, would open eyes hitherto blind to the truth and kindle a desire for eternal life with God.

Finally he expected at least some of his hearers to come to faith. This might not be a fully-formed understanding of the whole sweep of God's purpose in Christ, but it would mean that they had come into a living relationship with him which could be demonstrated by publicly getting baptised and developed by further teaching.

Where is this kind of preaching happening today? If it isn't going on in my area, what can be done about it? Word, Spirit and faith working together to produce a people for God. Bring it on!

2:3 LIFEGIVING WORDS

The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you – they are full of the Spirit and life.

John 6:63

Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.

John 5:24

John 6:63 has been badly served by its English translators. Either they give 'Spirit' a small 's'; or they put in extra words like 'full of' which aren't there in the text. Consequently this totally key statement of Jesus is passed over, when it should be printed in letters of fire on the front of every Bible.

The Message brings out its true potency: 'The Spirit can make life. Sheer muscle and willpower don't make anything happen. Every word I've spoken to you is a Spirit-word, and so it is life-making.' Life, of course, means not biological existence but heavenly, eternal deathlessness.

But just hearing Jesus' words doesn't by itself convey this kind of life. The Lord's constant complaint is that people hear and don't believe. In three of the four scenarios in the parable of the Sower the word fails to generate a lasting crop. The Bible isn't magic potion – it needs to be mixed with faith and perseverance (Luke 8:15).

What is true spirituality? It isn't a dreamy mysticality; it's the capacity to respond to the Spirit of God. We need to be aware of our response-level. What amount of jumping around do Jesus' words generate in me? That's the measure of how spiritually alive I am.

'In him was life' (John 1:4). An old saint lamented, 'I have not laid my pipe up to the fountainhead.' When I read the Bible, is it a time when I drink at the 'spring of living water' (Jeremiah 17:13) – or just something I've got to do like brushing my teeth?

5:6 PRAYER FROM WEAKNESS

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.

Romans 8:26

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

Psalms 145:18

Groaning suggests something isn't right. It indicates pain, perhaps, or disappointment, or a system that isn't working properly. Paul has been saying that the whole creation is groaning because it's in bondage to decay, and it longs to share the freedom of the finally redeemed children of God. We too are groaning in frustration while we wait for this to happen. We know things aren't right; but our certain hope is that they finally will be. The Psalmist felt this too. Meanwhile however we are to express our hope by praying. Prayer isn't for specialists. There is only one specialist in the art of praying, and that is the Holy Spirit. Let's remind ourselves who the Spirit is. He is none other than the Lord Jesus himself, who in his time on earth often went out at night or early in the morning to pour out his heart to his Father; and who in the garden of Gethsemane 'offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears' (Hebrews 5:7).

Prayer isn't for those who feel strong. We pray out of a sense of helplessness and dependence; if we thought we could manage on our own, we wouldn't bother to pray. But then we discover that we can't even pray properly! Despite knowing from the Bible what God's will is in general, we often find it very difficult to apply it to our immediate situation or to others' needs. We desperately want to ask God for something but we don't know what it is. We try to put our longings into words, but grammar and syntax fail us and all we can do is to groan incoherently.

Allow yourself to groan. You can't express it, but you truly long for things to be put right and for God's kingdom to come. Maybe all you can say is, 'Oh Lord!' or 'Please do something!' or 'Help!' Trust the Spirit to beam your longings directly to God so he can use them for his will to be done.

‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.

Zechariah 4:6

Apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:5

Coming to the end of one’s strength is not a pleasant experience. It can happen to people of any age. You simply run out of the ability to continue. This once happened to me on a Swiss mountain where the effects of altitude and setting too fast a pace overtook me and drained my youthful energy to zero. The only option was for me to abandon the climb and go down again slowly with a companion.

The exiles from Babylon returned to Jerusalem and started to rebuild the Temple. But the lack of resources, the opposition of enemies and the pathetic appearance of the building compared to Solomon’s Temple unnerved them. How could they possibly go on?

Archippus, a church leader, got a sharp message from Paul: ‘See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord’ (Colossians 4:17). We don’t know whether he was idle, or had tried everything and come up against a brick wall. But it must have stung.

Similarly we may come to a point in our work for Christ when we have done our best, but all to no avail. The forces against us are too strong. No human strategy or device seems to work. So do we simply despair? At such a point Jesus’ word and his Holy Spirit combine to bring us fresh hope. If we can do nothing apart from him, then the reverse is also true: ‘I can do all things through the one who strengthens me’ (Philippians 4:13 ESV).

This isn’t magic, or a kind of secret switch which turns on a hidden dynamo. It is the moment when we tell the Lord we can’t go on, and our only hope is for him to take over. This may be painful and humbling, but it may teach us a lesson for life, as it did for me.

Lord, I want to ‘go from strength to strength’ (Psalm 84:7). I don’t want to pack it in through utter weariness. But your word reminds me that I need to depend one-hundred-per-cent on you and on your renewing Spirit. Please do this for me now.

You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. By your Spirit you warned them through your prophets.

Nehemiah 9:20, 30

Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

Romans 15:4

‘It’s all very well for educated Jews like St Paul to go on about the value of the Old Testament, but for the average church member it’s completely unnecessary, apart from a few inspirational Psalms.’ Why do we need this largely unread part of the Bible?

As I’ve said elsewhere, I was given *Daily Light* as a confirmation present. Each morning and evening you could read a little sequence of Biblical snippets on a particular theme. The passages freely switched between OT and NT and were by and large faithful to their original context. It gave me a vivid sense of the unity and ‘from God-ness’ of the entire Bible. I wish more people used it (perhaps in a modernised version) today. It’s on the St Paul’s website under resources.

The Old Testament isn’t a waste of space. It’s about a God who speaks and acts. A God who cares passionately about his creation. A God who is going to put everything right and doesn’t mind how long he takes to do it. The same God who came to us in Jesus Christ.

It’s also about people who were like us. Decent and nasty in equal measure. Idealistic yet falling well short of the highest. Paying lip-service to the One True God but unreformed on the inside.

Its voices are as diverse as the flawed people who wrote its pages; yet its consistent author is the Holy Spirit who knows God and humankind through and through. Its tone is upbeat, through all the pain and confusion of its narrative. Its subtitle is ‘Hope, whatever.’

If only I knew it better! It’s there to teach me, but how teachable am I? The Bible is always going to be bigger than I am, because it’s God’s book. But it’s meant to be my book too. Please give it back to me.

2:5 SPIRIT OF FIRE

He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Luke 3:16

They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’

Luke 24:32

The two disciples walking back to Emmaus on the evening of the first Easter Day were joined by a stranger, who took them on a whistle-stop tour of the Old Testament. A treasure hunt for clues of Christ: Star, Lamb, Prophet, King, Branch, Servant, Son. Result: polite interest? stifled yawns? blank incomprehension? No – their hearts were set on fire. Their imaginations were kindled. They longed to hear more, to know more of this God.

This is the work of the Spirit. As we walk (or stumble) through the pages of the Bible, he draws alongside and walks with us. As a teenager I was given a copy of *Daily Light*. On each page was a leading verse, then a little string of passages developing the same idea. It demonstrated the thematic unity of the Bible to me and I couldn’t get enough of it. I was fired up!

Baptism is dipping something in an element until it is soaked through, like steeping a garment in dye or dunking a biscuit in tea. It is akin to the process of refining described in Malachi 3:2-3: ‘He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.’ Baptism with fire happens when the Refiner takes us into his word, soaking us in its cleansing and purifying power. Our part is to immerse ourselves in the truths of Scripture, looking for Christ in its pages, constantly asking the Spirit to create his own life within us and help us to love God more.

‘He will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house – make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned’ (Luke 3:17, The Message). Lord, walk with me through your word, set my heart alight and keep it burning with your love.

5:4 SPECIFIC LEADING

Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. Acts 16:6

How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’

Isaiah 30:19, 21

It was all very odd. Asia and Bithynia were the most civilised and influential provinces of the Eastern Roman Empire and it seemed obvious that the Jesus message should arrive there as a priority. Yet through a process of what felt like trial and error, but was guided at every point by the Holy Spirit, Paul’s little team was funnelled in a north-westerly direction through comparatively unimportant Mysia until they reached the coast, where Paul had his famous dream about a man from Macedonia begging for help.

Voices, dreams, intuitions, hunches: can we always trust them as being from God? The answer is ‘no’: they can be, but they may not be. When one is short of sleep, for instance, or under stress, one may hear specific words in one’s head that don’t actually mean a thing. Someone in a pathological state may hear voices telling them to commit murder or do something dangerous. This is very different from the clear and loving guidance of the Holy Spirit!

Isaiah’s ‘voice’ could be our conscience telling us what is right and wrong; or it could be God’s instructions about the next thing to do. A classic example is the series of nudges given to Philip resulting in the conversion of the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40). We should pray and check such intuitions with the Bible, or discuss them with a trusted friend; but we shouldn’t dismiss them out of hand (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). The Lord has promised to lead us, and he will.

A prayer based on Psalm 23: ‘Lord, you are my shepherd, I lack nothing. You guide me along the right paths for your name’s sake. I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. Thank you.’

5:3 GUIDANCE

Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.

Romans 8:14

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you. *Psalm 32:8*

When you buy a new car, a sat-nav is often included as standard equipment. This amazing gadget watches your every move from a satellite and tells you in the clearest possible words which way to go. But it isn't infallible, and it can, and sometimes has to be, overridden by human decision-making.

When we join God's kingdom family by faith in Christ, we are given the Holy Spirit as 'standard equipment'. He does not confer a magic infallibility upon us, but we are promised that he will lead us in our decision-making with our intelligent and prayerful cooperation.

The Spirit isn't a thing, he's a Person. Unlike a sat-nav, we can talk back to him. He has our best interests at heart, and he knows us through and through. He knows the territory ahead of us; he also knows and loves the other people we are going to be dealing with, bumping into, speaking with, thinking thoughts about.

How does God's Spirit lead us? As we pay careful attention to his word in the Bible; as we pray and consider; as we take advice from friends; as circumstances play out. He won't override our choices, though if they are contrary to his will he is unlikely to leave us in peace.

In the Lord's Prayer we say: 'Our Father in heaven, may your name be hallowed, may your kingdom come, may your will be done.' This isn't resignation to a blind fate, or a catch-all formula for getting prayer answered. It's intelligent and active cooperation in the purposes of One who knows us and loves us, and whose plans are far more wonderful than we ever dared hope (Ephesians 3:20).

'Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life' (Psalm 143:8). A good prayer to start the day!

2:6 THE MIND OF CHRIST

This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. We have the mind of Christ. 1

Corinthians 2:13, 16

All your children will be taught by the Lord, and great will be their peace. *Isaiah 54:13*

How can Paul say that he and his fellow-apostles have the mind of Christ? Only because we can, all of us, be trained to think in the way Christ thinks. Schools are tasked with delivering a curriculum. In a free state this has no sinister implications. Our children need to be taught, so teachers are necessary. I have been a teacher, and my principal task, as I saw it, was to explain the language, history and culture central to my subject. Explanation could take many forms, but its object was to open minds to think for themselves. It wasn't 'like it or lump it,' it was 'work it out for yourselves, and I'll help where I can.'

So words mattered. They had to be appropriate both to the subject (telling it how it was) and to the students (enabling their comprehension). This happens as I study the Bible. I need God to show me how it is ('spiritual realities'), using the words given by the Spirit. I need to be trained to think as Christ thinks.

The Bible is the handbook of the Spirit; the Spirit is the handmaid of the Bible. The Bible uniquely cross-references itself. It says the same things in different ways, again and again. The New Testament is constantly quoting and interpreting the Old. Light sheds light on light.

Lord Jesus, I don't want the world's ideas or merely human wisdom. Show me how things are from your point of view. And give me your abundant peace as you help me to work it all out.

3:1 GENUINE FAITH

Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

2 Corinthians 1:21-22

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test? *2 Corinthians 13:5*

Am I really and truly a Christian? How can I be sure?

A budding young actress was being auditioned for the role of Juliet in Shakespeare's famous play. She very much wanted the part, but she couldn't be certain that the Director would overlook her inexperience. A friend told her, 'Don't play Juliet, let Juliet play you.' So she soaked herself thoroughly in the character of Juliet, and when the audition came, she let Shakespeare's Juliet take over. And she got the part.

Paul's relationship with the church at Corinth was a stormy one. He could never be certain that they really accepted him as Christ's accredited messenger. But instead of trying to impress them with his apostolic qualifications, he appealed to what they both had in common: the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them and assuring them that they truly belonged to God.

How do I know if I have the Spirit? Well, Paul says, examine yourself. Test yourself. Does the Spirit have you? The Spirit is the token of God's ownership, the seal or stamp that shows we are the genuine article. If we soak ourselves thoroughly in the words and character of Jesus, we don't need to play-act being Christians, we can let him take over and express himself through us.

Does the Spirit have me? Or is my faith just part of my ego-trip, my efforts to convince God and other people about how good I am? The test is, whether I am prepared to let Christ take over my life today. If there is some resistance, some withholding of full consent, ask him to work away at it from within, and he will.

5:2 KEPT SAFE

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

Philippians 2:12-13

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Psalm

51:10-12

Does God save me, or do I save myself? How much do I have to do to cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in me? Do I simply sit back and let God do everything, or should I be striving to make sure I'm safe?

An army rock-climbing instructor is training an enthusiastic recruit. He ties the lad securely on the rope and goes up the route, making fast at the top. The youth thinks it's a breeze and ascends confidently. Then doubt takes over as he meets a harder section of cliff: he nearly falls off, but for a helpful tug from above and advice on what holds to use. He arrives at the top in a reflective frame of mind. 'Did I climb that, or was it you who got me up?' 'Perhaps it was both of us,' says the instructor.

David thought being king was a breeze. In his eyes he was temptation-proof, until he found he wasn't. He wrote Psalm 51 out of the contrition and self-doubt that resulted from his fall.

In the life of faith, God's Holy Spirit isn't just there to save us when we're falling. He is actively working in us in order to get us up the long climb; without him we'd give up. David's prayer, 'Grant me a willing spirit!' avoids the extremes of over-confidence and despair. God's Spirit and ours combine to keep us climbing.

Lord Jesus, I depend on you to bring me safely through my life in this world. 'Be thou my guardian and my guide, and hear me when I call; let not my slippery footsteps slide, and hold me lest I fall.'

5:1 THERE'S A WAR ON!

I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save.

Isaiah 49:25

When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armour in which the man trusted and divides up his plunder.

Luke 11:21-22

If it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

Matthew 12:28

Cyber warfare is a fact of our times. Nations or terrorist groups can use computer technology to disrupt their opponents' systems, discover their best-guarded secrets and feed misinformation into their media. One example is how the Stuxnet virus was successfully deployed to put Iranian nuclear centrifuges out of action.

I'm sure most of us feel completely out of our depth here. But the Bible warns us that an even more deadly war is being waged 'in the heavenly realms' (Ephesians 6:12). We can't afford to be in ignorance about this; at the same time, we need a balanced perspective – because the Lord Jesus Christ is greater than all the powers of evil. Just as he dealt with oppressive forces in his earthly ministry, so he still releases people from spiritual slavery and death today, and soon 'he will reign for ever and ever' (Revelation 11:15).

We are called in our various ways to work with him in this campaign. 'They triumphed over him (the enemy) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony' (Revelation 12:11). The cross declares the irreversible defeat of evil (Colossians 2:15). But the victory won there by Jesus has to be applied by the Spirit through the demonstrable faith of his followers. The kingdom has to be contended for in every generation, and that will involve us.

'If God is for us, who can be against us?' (Romans 8:31). Help me, Lord, to understand the real situation. Use me to join in contending for the kingdom, not in my name or my strength but in yours. Praying for others is a way I can do this. If I'm flagging or disorganised, revive me.

3:2 JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Romans 3:23-24

You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

1 Corinthians 6:11

A person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.

Galatians 2:16

In printing terms, the paragraphs below are 'justified' – the left and right vertical margins are precisely aligned with each other. I didn't achieve this myself – I simply clicked an icon that did it for me.

In order to enter God's 'glory', eternal life in his presence, we human beings need to be perfectly aligned with the will and character of God. If we differ or dissent from it in the smallest particular, we miss out. God is good and right, and nothing that is not totally good and right can exist in his presence.

When a space rocket re-enters the earth's atmosphere, it must do so at the right angle: too steep and it would instantly burn up, too shallow and it would be deflected back into space.

'Righteousness' or 'rightness' is a key theme of the whole Bible. Being 'justified,' or put right with God, isn't an invention of Paul or anyone else, it is there from the beginning. God's plan is to make everything right, to bring the world and the human race into full alignment with himself through Christ (Acts 3:21, Colossians 1:20).

The whole Godhead is involved in this goal: the loving grace of God, the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus Christ, the cleansing and renewing activity of the Spirit, are all active in putting us right with himself. We can't do this by ourselves; we trust him to do it for us.

So what is faith in practice? It means abandoning my former attitude of self-will and self-justification, and accepting God's way of putting me right with himself. Faith is saying a thankful 'Yes!' to Christ's offer of permanent friendship, made effective by the Spirit who is holy.

3:3 RECEPTIVENESS

Our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.

1 Thessalonians 1:5

One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

Acts 16:14

How does someone get to the point where they simply must give their heartfelt acceptance to the proclamation of Jesus Christ? Do they have to be 'religious'? Do they need a thorough training in the facts of the Christian faith? Does the speaker need great passion and oratorical skill? Or is it solely the work of the Holy Spirit?

The first person in Europe to believe in Christ was Lydia, a business-woman who dealt in the manufacture and sale of purple cloth. She was an expert judge of the quality of this material, in an industry which prided itself on the high degree of perfection in its goods. She also set herself the highest standards in her personal life. There were many temptations for a rich woman travelling alone to the Greek cities of Paul's time. She made it her habit to seek out women like herself who believed in a God of goodness, to whom you could pray for strength and guidance. So she joined this little group meeting in the cool shade of the Philippi riverside every sabbath.

What precise point did Paul make that 'opened her heart'? Was it the unconditional nature of the gospel? She might accept or reject a purple garment on the basis of its quality, but God's loving invitation to her in Christ was without any conditions. Jesus bore the sins of absolutely everybody, so that no-one would be disqualified from heaven. You don't have to qualify. Only believe!

The same Spirit who opened Lydia's heart then can do a similar work in me now. I don't qualify, but I can choose to believe God's word. Only I can't expect him to let me remain content with who I was. I don't need to pass a quality test – but I do need quality control in his service.

4:6 FLESH AND SPIRIT

If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

Romans 8:13

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Galatians 5:24

The Romans had no pity. They crucified the 6000 slaves who had rebelled with Spartacus, lining the Appian Way with crosses for mile after mile. In the film they had stood up one after another and said, 'I am Spartacus.' Now they all suffered the same fate as he did.

What is 'the flesh'? It can refer to our human body, which is a good gift of God. But more often it is the rebel principle of human nature, which rejects the will of God and substitutes our own self-will.

When I became a Christian, I was baptised into Christ. This wasn't just a gateway ritual making me a church member. Paul explains in Romans 6 that baptism was uniting me in a fundamental way with Christ in his death so that the old 'I' could be buried and I would rise again as a new person, no longer under the iron rule of sin.

There was no mercy for any follower of Spartacus. They followed him blindly and paid the penalty. But this is gloriously not God's sentence on those who declare allegiance to his Son. 'Mercy there was great and grace was free.' Instead of death, eternal life; instead of corruption, wholeness; instead of slavery, freedom.

Now here is the mystery. The flesh is dead, it received its lethal injection at the cross. But it will still be giving us trouble until the moment we die physically. To his dying breath Jesus was tempted. We remain vulnerable like him.

This is why I need the ministry of the Holy Spirit, day in and day out. I need his strength to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions and to lead a Christlike and self-controlled life (Titus 2:12). I can't crucify the flesh by myself. But I can say 'Yes' to the Spirit of Christ in me, whose service is perfect freedom.

4:5 CONSCIENCE

I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit.

Romans 9:1

Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience.

Hebrews 10:22

How do we deal with a guilty conscience? What if we are aware of a little voice niggling away inside us, constantly reminding us that we've done something wrong or need to put something right?

One way is to squash it, suppress it, pretend it's not there. This can happen when the alarm clock goes off in the morning. We were having such a delicious sleep, such an intriguing dream – if we ignore the bleeper long enough it will turn itself off and we can carry on where we left off.

Luther, urged to abandon his 'heretical' views at the Reichstag at Worms in 1519, said famously: 'My conscience is bound in the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to act against conscience. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me! Amen.'

Conscience and the Holy Spirit are not quite the same thing, but they can be powerful allies against giving in to dodgy practices or plausible arguments. The more we obey our consciences, the more clearly we will hear the Holy Spirit telling us what is the will of God in a given situation.

What if we start praying and our conscience brings up a list of reasons why God can't possibly listen to us? This is where 'sprinkling' is such good news: it refers to the constant stream of forgiveness and mercy that pours from Christ's cross, like a cleansing shower that keeps us clean in God's sight.

This encouragement in Hebrews deals with three fears I have when I pray: (i) that I am not being sincere enough, (ii) that I haven't got enough faith and (iii) that I'm not clean in God's sight. No – the same Spirit who inspired these words then, invites me to be confident before God now.

3:4 THE MASTER'S VOICE

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

Acts 1:1-2

'This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

Luke 24:44-45

Jesus calls himself 'the good shepherd' (John 10:11), whom his sheep follow because they know his voice. This 'voice' has been speaking since the moment of creation. It has continued to be heard in the 'Scriptures', the Hebrew Bible of the Old Testament, and in the New Testament. It is the distinctive voice of God's own Son.

The famous logo of 'His Master's Voice' originated when the owner of a dog called Nipper played a speech by his brother, who had recently died, on a phonograph. The dog immediately trotted over and sat by the machine, listening intently. He knew the timbre and intonation of that voice, however primitively recorded.

The Holy Spirit faithfully transmits Jesus' voice to us just as he has always done. Even before he left the earth, Jesus 'gave instructions through the Holy Spirit' to his apostles; but it was only the end of the beginning – the Gospels record 'all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach' (Acts 1:1). He has never stopped this work. Does that mean his instructions now could be different from those he originally gave? Will he contradict himself? Clearly not; but his words will always be specific to the hearers, because he has 'other sheep to bring' (John 10:16). The question is, am I listening for the Master's voice to come freshly today? Will I obey what he tells me?

How much actual communication happens in my times of Bible-reading and prayer? Or is it just a routine performance before (or after) the day's doings? Am I scared of what he might be wanting to tell me? 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!' (Mark 9:7).

3:5 NO-COST INVITATION

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

Isaiah 55:1

The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come, and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

Revelation 22:17

Some theologians were discussing whether there was any difference between Christianity and other world religions. When C S Lewis came into the room, they asked his opinion. 'That's easy,' he replied. 'It's grace.'

Grace is God's free forgiveness for the undeserving. Paul never forgot that he had been a persecutor and man of violence. But, he writes later, 'the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly' (1 Timothy 1:14). Peter, who knew what it was to fail spectacularly, spoke of 'the God of all grace, who has called us to his eternal glory in Christ' (1 Peter 5:10).

The water of life is free to all who come. But they have to be thirsty. Even when our own wells have run dry, the last place we think of going is to God himself. 'My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water' (Jeremiah 2:13).

Religion demands; grace gives. The cross of Christ isn't a stern question-mark about our credentials, it's God's signature below his offer of free pardon. This is why the Spirit and the bride join in proclaiming the invitation: the Spirit because Jesus is the forgiver, the bride because the church is the fellowship of the forgiven.

Maybe I'm hard-wired to suspect 'free' offers. Surely I'll have to contribute something – maybe all I've got? But what if I've got nothing? Surely the minimum required is faith. But faith isn't something I contribute – it's two empty hands held out to receive. 'Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to your cross I cling.'

4:4 TWO NATURES

The flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

Galatians 5:17

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.

1 John 3:9

If I have been 'born of God,' that is, if I have received Jesus as Saviour and Lord and have become a new person through the Holy Spirit, how come I still find the old tendency to do what I want, to have what I desire and to be the most important person in my life and thinking?

During World War II many people were recruited as double agents: they appeared to be operating for one side while really working for the other. When we transfer from the 'dominion of darkness' to 'the kingdom of God's beloved Son' (Colossians 1:13), are we in effect adopting a dual role or even suffering a split personality?

Quite the opposite. When Christ comes into my life, he unifies my personality under his Lordship, enabling me to do what I found impossible before, like loving others, forgoing personal pride and having relationships without seeking my own pleasure or profit.

Nevertheless, he does not magically transform me into a sinless saint. 'Anti-God energy remains in the Christian's spiritual system,' says J I Packer, 'and the battle against its manifold forms of expression is lifelong.' So the Psalmist prays, 'Do not take your Holy Spirit from me I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you' (Psalm 51:11, 119:11). The word and the Spirit are decisive in this conflict. They are the dependable allies of the will.

I sometimes feel a complete fraud in this area of thoughts and attitudes. But the Lord, who knows me so well, is the one who 'forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases' (Psalm 103:3). Praise him!

4:3 UNITED WITH CHRIST

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Galatians 2:20

Anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

1 Corinthians 6:17 NRSV

There's a big difference between a Post-It note and superglue: the one is easily detachable, the other is an indissoluble bond.

Paul is writing to people who think sex is like a Post-It note. The Corinthians are assuming that you can have sex with a series of partners, and how true that is of our own world too, at least in Westernised society. He is saying in the most forceful terms: no, when you have sexual relations you are not only forming a temporary bodily bond with another person, something else is happening at the level of the human spirit. Two people are supergluing themselves together to become 'one flesh' (Genesis 2:24). A new union, a new entity has been formed.

This happens whether one is a Christian or not. But if I am a Christian, if I have become joined to the Lord Jesus Christ through faith, I have become 'one spirit with him.' A new person has been formed, who is Christ-in-me. I'm not on my own any more. The God of love has moved in to stay permanently with me (John 14:23); the Holy Spirit has united with my human spirit to make a 'new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Paul sees this not just as a helpful idea, but as theological truth affecting moral behaviour. God is forming a new kind of people for himself, who think and behave differently, who are different, from their contemporaries. He says, if you commit to Jesus Christ as Lord today, you and he walk around Corinth tomorrow together as one. A new person has arrived on the block.

I will need to review all my relationships in the light of this radical teaching. Take me as I am, Lord, and make me all your own.

3:6 GREAT PEACE

The mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

Romans 8:6

Great peace have those who love your law. *Psalms 119:165*

The peace we are told about in the Bible isn't a feeling. It isn't to be worked up by psychological means. It isn't the monopoly of a particular kind of temperament. On the contrary, it can be known even by those who are constitutionally neurotic or anxiety-prone.

It is promised by Jesus to his confused, uncertain and deeply concerned disciples: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you' (John 14:27). In a few hours the shepherd is going to be struck and the sheep scattered, but this is no cause for mental turmoil or dismay; everything is under control. They have the fundamental assurance that the eternal God is their refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms (Deuteronomy 33:27). Faith isn't a waste of time, because it depends on a trustable Lord.

T S Eliot wrote: 'Teach us to care and not to care; teach us to sit still.' Thomas à Kempis taught of 'the privilege of a free mind' which enables one to 'pass amidst many cares as though one has no care, but not as though one were numb to all feeling.' This is indeed a 'privilege', an unearned gift of grace, the product and fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

This dynamic and liberating sense of trust in a trustable God isn't something that comes and goes. It is permanently available to even the weakest believer. But like orchard fruit or a herbaceous border it requires constant cultivation. It is those who 'love your law', who can't have enough of God's word, who know his promises at their heart's core, that will possess truly 'great peace.'

Like Martha, I tend to be 'worried and upset about many things' (Luke 10:41). Teach me the one thing I need above all. To sit at Jesus' feet, hearing his word, drinking in his Spirit. To train my mind to trust God, to fix it like a climbing plant to the trellis of his faithfulness which will outlast time and circumstance.

4:1 GOD'S CALL TO BE HOLY

Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written, 'Be holy, because I am holy.' *1 Peter 1:15*

It is God's will that you should be sanctified. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

1 Thessalonians

4:3, 7-8

When the men in the First World War trenches heard the command to go over the top, they simply had to go. They knew that even if they survived the perilous crossing of no-man's-land, they would meet the rolls of barbed wire guarding the enemy trenches. If by a miracle they got back alive, the same command would be given the next night. It was madness. Yet to disobey was unthinkable.

'You must be mad to become a Christian,' says a friend. 'On the contrary, it's the sanest decision I ever made,' we reply. God's call to 'live a holy life' may be death to my lower nature, but if Christ went to the cross for me, it's the only logical response. I simply can't hunker down in the doubtful security of my muddy trench and dodge the instructions given to every soldier along the line.

What is meant by 'being holy'? This kind of language is unpopular in an age of permissiveness; it smacks of moral imperialism. What right has God to tell me to be perfect like him? It also baffles the weak will. I simply can't match up to these ideals.

'The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world' (1 John 4:4). The Spirit is given to us not only to stiffen our resolve but to enlarge our capabilities. By deliberately enlisting his help we can succeed against the enemy. 'Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God' (Ephesians 6:17). I may not feel strong, but I am.

I admit I'm a coward and a weakling. This holiness business reduces me to jelly. 'Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure"?' (Proverbs 20:9). But if you say 'Go,' I'll go. Only you've got to be by my side.

4:2 TEMPTATION

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

Luke 4:1-2

We do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.

Hebrews 4:15

What exactly is temptation, and why does the Lord's prayer include a request not to be 'led into' it? Jesus' own extended period of temptation was initiated by the Holy Spirit, and his repeated reliance on the word of God is a model for our own resistance, so why may we not ask for similar times of testing, so that we may be spiritually strengthened as he was for the work of the kingdom?

The simple answer is that in our fallen weakness we are no match for temptation, and we should never actively seek opportunities for meeting it. An hour or two after being warned by his Master, 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation: the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak' (Matthew 26:41), Simon Peter is strolling into the governor's headquarters as if he is going to rescue Jesus single-handed – with the inevitable result.

Another classic example is Samson and Delilah. Aware as he must have been that she is acting for the enemy in tracking down the source of his great physical strength, Samson nevertheless allows his secret to be wheedled out of him (Judges 16).

Temptation is the urge to do what is contrary to God's will; it arises from the world around us, from the proneness of our own hearts to sin, and from the ultimate source of evil we call the devil, and following it results in spiritual death (Ephesians 2:1-3).

'No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it' (1 Corinthians 10:13). Lord, help me to remember both my own frailty and the availability of your Spirit.