

1:1 GIFT OF LIFE

Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. *John 5:21*

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. *Acts 2:32-33*

'I don't understand why all this Holy Spirit stuff is necessary. Surely if I repent honestly and genuinely, and try as hard as I can to live a good life, God will accept me into heaven.' I go to church and try to follow Christ's example of love. Doesn't that make me a Christian?

Every lifeguard is trained in mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, which can restore breath to an apparently drowned person. What it can't do is revive someone who is actually dead. Your efforts are too late; that corpse is never going to get up and join in the beach volleyball.

When the human race stepped outside God's will, however it first happened, we incurred the penalty of death – which means exclusion from God's holy and light-filled presence. Only God himself can restore us from corpses to live players. This is why Jesus came: to bring eternal life to those who were utterly incapable of producing it by themselves.

If we don't realise the seriousness of the crisis, we won't appreciate the wonder of the solution. Resurrection is God's speciality (Romans 4:17). Jesus was dead beyond all human hope of resuscitation, yet God raised him up, as a sober fact of history. From then on anyone can come alive with him, by receiving his promise and being given the Holy Spirit.

'You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand' (Psalm 16:10-11). Because the first promise applies to Jesus (Acts 2:31), the second one applies to me through faith in him (1 John 5:11-12). Thank you, Lord, for giving me life in yourself.

1:2 LIFE IN CHRIST

The Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:2 NRSV

God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

1 John 5:11-12

You refuse to come to me to have life.

John 5:40

If you were diagnosed with a deadly disease, and you were told that there was only one antidote to that disease, wouldn't you move heaven and earth to get hold of that antidote?

The Syrian general Naaman heard that Elisha the prophet could heal him of his fatal leprosy. The only snag was, it meant dipping himself in a muddy stream in enemy territory. This was too humiliating, so off he stumped in a temper. Eventually common sense prevailed and he took the medicine – which worked! (2 Kings 5:1-14).

The Israelites were dying of snakebite in the wilderness. The cure offered by Moses was to look at a bronze snake on a cross-shaped pole. Those who did recovered; those who couldn't bring themselves to do such a simple thing perished (Numbers 21:4-9).

Jesus used both these stories to show how anybody, regardless of their nationality or status, could be healed of the universal pandemic of sin by coming to him and putting their trust in him (Luke 4:27; John 3:14-16). Why would anyone reject such an offer? Only if they couldn't see the seriousness of sin, or if their pride was offended in some way. Or if they thought the cure was worse than the disease.

Some people know all about Christ's offer of eternal life, but won't risk receiving the Holy Spirit. If only they knew it doesn't mean being taken over by an alien force – it is giving Jesus the prime place in one's life. Are we making the same mistake as Naaman or the Jews?

Is my pride really preventing me from receiving God's free gift of eternal life in Christ? Or would it cost me too much for the King of love to deal with my insidious ego? What is standing between me and the Spirit today?

1:3 IN-BETWEEN FAITH

At Ephesus Paul found some disciples and asked them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ They answered, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ So Paul asked, ‘Then what baptism did you receive?’ ‘John’s baptism,’ they replied. *Acts 19:1-3*

‘I baptise with water,’ John replied, ‘but among you stands one you do not know.’ *John 1:26*

There is a party game where a pair of scissors is passed round the circle and each member has to say in turn whether the answer is ‘crossed’ or ‘uncrossed’. The initiated have great fun at the expense of the uninitiated – until all but one have guessed the secret and the poor individual left still has no idea why he or she can’t give the right answer. They are part of the circle, but not in the know.

It is possible to be a baptised believer and not to know the Christ who is the origin and focus of one’s faith. There are Christian churches whose members live between Easter and Pentecost, soundly believing the great truths of the incarnation, atonement and resurrection, yet having no first-hand knowledge of Christ himself through the Holy Spirit. They have a kind of ‘in-between’ faith.

But surely the Holy Spirit isn’t some kind of secret cult for ‘those in the know’? Surely, as Peter explained, (Acts 2:38-39), all who repent and are baptised receive forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit?

John’s baptism was about moral reformation, as a preparatory ground-clearing for the coming of Christ whose baptism would be in the Spirit (Matthew 3:11). One may be striving to live a moral and religious life, and never to have come into a relationship of personal trust in Jesus Christ. The believers at Ephesus probably knew ‘about’ the Spirit, but they had never been taught that they needed this gift in order to gain a first-hand knowledge of Christ himself.

Paul talks about ‘receiving Christ Jesus as Lord’ (Colossians 2:6). If I have never consciously done this, then maybe my faith is of that ‘in-between’ variety, and I need to take a further step of commitment to the living Christ.

1:4 BECAUSE I LIVE

Because I live, you also will live.

John 14:19

God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 2:6

If Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness.

Romans 8:10

Learning a new language takes time and can be humbling. When I first visited my daughter in South America knowing no Spanish, I spent a long time plucking up courage to ask for matches at the local shop before I could boil myself a cup of tea. My accent gave me away, of course; but that tea was the best I have ever tasted.

The language of the Bible takes a lifetime to learn, even in translation. This particularly applies to the inner logic of our relationship with the Lord. Phrases like ‘in Christ’, ‘Christ in me’, ‘the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ cry out to be related into a coherent network of promises which we can confidently claim for ourselves. At first it seems as if the Spirit is in a separate category to Christ, as indeed is the strict case theologically; but then we find that they flow in and out of one another like dolphins at play.

How come I am spiritually alive? Is it because I share Christ’s resurrection? Or because Christ has come to live in me? Or because I have received the Holy Spirit? Have I become a new person with a heavenly location simply by believing in Christ? Yes to all these!

The important thing is, not that I be correct in every nuance, but that I should pluck up courage to exercise the language I am learning. This may involve a stumbling (and humbling) dialogue with the Lord, but always with the aim of realising his presence more deeply and satisfyingly.

I need to work on these promises, and other similar ones. Developing faith may mean an active struggle with unfamiliar language. Lord, help me to learn the logic of ‘righteousness’, so that the Spirit may apply your word to my moment-by-moment relationship with you.

1:5 KNOWING GOD'S WILL

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.

Colossians 1:9

My goal is that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Colossians 2:2-3

My iPad is a complete mystery to me. Getting it seven years ago was a big step for one who regards newfangled devices with great suspicion – yet I can't claim to be using more than a small fraction of its applications, and I am still constantly turning to the handbook for help, or (better still) to younger family members.

Paul tells the Christians at Colosse, a hill-country market town in Asia Minor, that he wants them full to the brim with the knowledge of God's will, and to be experts in understanding his mysteries, rather like spiritual millionaires who can draw upon limitless resources of wisdom. How can he say this? Didn't great saints like Job, Solomon and Jeremiah have to admit that they were like little children in their understanding of the Almighty? Yet Paul writes, 'We have received the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us' (1 Corinthians 2:12).

Yes indeed, God's will may seem obscure at times. But our knowledge of it comes to us through our relationship with Christ, 'who has become for us wisdom from God' (1 Corinthians 1:30). Just as my iPad is my link with the huge store of human wisdom on the internet, so through the Spirit I can be in constant touch with the Lord Jesus Christ, for every need.

'If you accept my words and store up my commands within you, applying your heart to understanding and calling out for insight, searching for it as for hidden treasure, then you will find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom' (Proverbs 2:1-6). His promise and my prayer for today.

1:6 THE KINGDOM WITHIN

On being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, 'The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, "Here it is," or "There it is," because the kingdom of God is in your midst (or within you).'

Luke 17:21

Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit.

John 3:5,6

We were standing on a small hilltop in France under a cloudy sky, waiting for a solar eclipse. In the distance we could see cars frantically chasing patches of sunlight so they could catch a glimpse of the actual eclipse. Then the sky grew dark and the sounds of nature around us went completely silent. It was happening where we were, even though we couldn't see the event itself. Slightly frustrating, but it was what we had come for.

The Pharisees weren't the only ones waiting for God's kingdom to arrive. There were many ordinary people who were similarly longing for the Scriptures to be fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah, people like Simeon whom the Holy Spirit revealed the true nature of one quite ordinary infant (Luke 2:27).

Jesus is making the point that the coming of God's kingdom is not a matter of observing external events. It is what is happening by the action of the Spirit, as Christ is made known to people's hearts and he is accepted as Lord. One day, to be sure, Christ will return publicly and visibly as the world's King (Mark 14:61-62). But until that unpredictable day, the coming of the kingdom is like the slow and invisible spread of yeast through a lump of dough (Matthew 13:33).

Am I blind, like the Pharisees? Am I looking for the kingdom of God in the wrong place? Or do I trust the Spirit as he leads me to the Christ-child himself, so that he can be born in me? I don't want anything spectacular. I just want to find him.