

5:1 GOD SOURCED

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. Acts 2:17-18, quoting Joel 2:28-29

Everything that we have – right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start – comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:30 (The Message)

Pride goes before a fall. King Nebuchadnezzar was walking on the flat roof of his palace in Babylon, and the thought came to him: ‘You’re the one who has built this great city, by your own power and for your own royal glory’ (Daniel 4:29-30). In spite of all he’d been told by Daniel about the Most High God being the source of all human achievements, he chose to take the credit for himself. It cost him his kingdom, his dignity and his sanity.

‘But surely I can take some credit for what small successes in life I may have achieved?’ It depends on your line of reasoning. You may indeed have made some right choices, resisted wrong incentives, set up noble aims in life. What part do you think God played in all this? Yes, you prayed, you studied, you struggled, you sacrificed, but all this needed a spiritual energy that didn’t originate from you. It came from God’s Spirit and from union with the Lord Jesus Christ who died and rose again to save you.

In the film *Bruce Almighty*, Bruce Nolan blames God for things going wrong in his life. So God allows him to experience being Divine for a few days. It takes a road accident and his partner’s love to bring him to his senses and realise how much he needs the grace and wisdom of the One who is perfectly in control of his life.

Thank you, Lord God, for what visions and dreams I may have had. But it’s another thing to claim that I’ve lived up to them or fulfilled them. Help me to acknowledge my total dependence on you for everything that’s worthwhile in my life. Keep your Spirit flowing from the inexhaustible wellspring that is your Son Jesus Christ.

5:2 FRUIT OF THE LIGHT

Blessed are those who walk in the light of your presence, Lord. They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness. Psalm 89:15-16

You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Ephesians 5:8-10

A life full of ‘goodness, righteousness and truth’ seems something we only read about in the lives of the holiest of God’s saints – or wistfully look forward to when this present existence is over and we are enjoying a new creation altogether. In fact, Paul seems to regard it as the norm for every Christian. He seems to imply that the resources for this quality of life are already available to us. But how?

They are, he tells the believers in the Greek city of Ephesus, ‘the fruit of the light.’ This is such an odd idea (can light bear fruit?) that some early versions changed it to ‘the fruit of the Spirit,’ as in Galatians 5:22-23. But the essential point is that these qualities are directly related to Christ who is present with us and within us. Jesus’ life was good and right and true when he was on earth, and by his Spirit he can impart the same character to us today.

Photosynthesis is the process by which plants make their own food using carbon dioxide, water and sunlight. This enables them to produce fruit such as carrots, potatoes, apples and so on. It is not enough just to have sunlight – plants need to be watered in order to grow. Otherwise they receive no energy and they wither away.

Jesus is our inner store of sunlight; without him we would wither and die spiritually. But we need faith in order to ‘water’ the plant regularly. Jude 21 says ‘Keep yourselves in God’s love’ which suggests a conscious and continual immersion in gospel truth.

Lord Jesus, I covet the ‘all-day-long’ life of joy and rightness expressed by the Psalmist. Show me how to bask in your love. Remind me by your Spirit of all that you are and all you have done for me.

5:3 INWARDLY RENEWED

Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. *2 Corinthians 4:16*

Renewal by the Holy Spirit. *Titus 3:5*

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.

Isaiah 40:31 KJV

In the film *Chariots of Fire* Eric Liddell's Sunday sermon (in which he quotes the Isaiah passage above) is intercut with scenes from the Olympic steeplechase, showing athletes in the prime of their power stumbling exhausted at the water obstacle then getting to their feet with fresh determination to continue the race.

Paul knew what it was to take a battering. He speaks of being 'under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself' (2 Corinthians 1:8). But it wasn't human strength that he was relying on, it was God's ability to raise the dead, if he so chose. At Lystra he was attacked by a rock-throwing crowd and dragged apparently lifeless outside the city, only to get up again and return to the city with his friends (Acts 14:19-20).

Is this ability to survive physical hardship a special gift for super-saints, or is it for quite ordinary Christians as well? It is for all who have the Holy Spirit, that is, every believer. The word 'renew' in Isaiah can mean 'exchange'. The idea is that we give our human strength to the Lord and he gives us his Divine strength in exchange.

It is for a mother trying to cope with a young family; for a politician being interviewed by hostile reporters; for a teacher facing an unruly class; for a chronic invalid waking to another day of pain and fragility; for anyone, in fact, who is at the end of their own resources. We will never reach the end of God's resources.

Lord, renew my youth like the eagle's (Psalm 103:5). Teach me to wait on you in expectation, patience and trust. Help me 'still to bear fruit in old age, and to stay fresh and green' (Psalm 92:14), for your glory.

5:4 HELP AT HAND

... Through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ... *Philippians 1:19*

I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear, I will help you. *Isaiah 41:13*

'Provision' translates an ancient Greek word (*epichorēgia*) which gave every citizen a real buzz. To ensure the state's military security and regular celebrations, wealthy Athenians pledged that they would be entirely responsible for specific items such as a trireme (warship) or the entire cast for a festival play programme. It meant 'the continual production of necessary resources by a rich patron.'

The Lord our God similarly pledges that he will faithfully supply all we need for the ongoing demands of the life of faith. This includes warfare against evil, battling for social justice, knowing his will in difficult situations, and inward trust and serenity. 'Holding your right hand' means friendship, guidance, reassurance and fresh strength.

Paul, writing from the confinement of a Roman jail, is facing an ambiguous future. He doesn't know if he's going to be released or executed. He feels a bit like Job, the good man overcome by misfortune and suffering, who feels that God has turned against him. Not a bit of it! responds Paul. He has two mighty allies: the prayers of his friends in Philippi (more dependable than Job's comforters) which bombard the throne of heaven, and the Holy Spirit who is God's 'faithful supplier' right there by his side.

The Old Testament may not mention the Holy Spirit much by name, but in its pages, especially in the Psalms and prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, promises of God's presence and action shower out like coins from a rich patron's moneybags. To claim these promises is to receive on-the-spot resourcing for spirit, mind and body.

I may not feel God is with me; in fact, I often feel pretty much the opposite. Where is this promised help? (The Psalmist is always asking this question.) Well, when do the prayers of God's children not reach him? When has he ever failed to provide for them? Hope on!

5:5 SPIRITUAL OXYGEN

This is what the Sovereign Lord says: ‘Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’

Ezekiel 37:9

Jesus breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’

John 20:21-22

It is a quite extraordinary chapter, Ezekiel 37, ‘The Valley of Dry Bones’. It is an extended parable of the Spirit coming into the dead people of Israel, so that they will know the Lord and regain their life and vitality. As Ezekiel speaks the word, the ‘breath’ (or wind, or Spirit) enters them and they stand up on their feet, a vast army.

During the COVID 19 pandemic of 2020, ventilators were used in cases where people could not breathe naturally. Patients were artificially resuscitated by having oxygen pumped into them. This treatment might continue for days, until they were once again able to breathe by themselves.

So when Jesus symbolically breathes upon the disciples on the evening of the first Easter Day, he is not only preparing them for the actual event of Pentecost in a few weeks’ time, he is telling them in a vivid way that they cannot live the new resurrection life without the power of God’s Holy Spirit.

Exactly the same word is used at the creation of the first man Adam when the Lord God ‘breathed into his nostrils the breath of life’ (Genesis 2:7). The lesson couldn’t be clearer. If we want God’s life, we receive it from the Spirit. This isn’t artificially pumped into us from outside, it happens by sharing the life of Jesus and letting him invigorate us from within as we exercise the lungs of faith.

If I want the love, goodness, purity, patience, whatever, that only Jesus can give me, to meet the demands of being his follower, I can breathe in his Spirit and say, ‘Your power, Lord, for this thing now.’ It isn’t a magic formula, it’s what Scripture teaches so plainly. It’s the gift of the risen Lord. It’s how he is going to live his life in me today.

5:6 MOVED BY THE SPIRIT

Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.

Luke 2:25

Anna gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Luke 2:38

The work of the choreographer is rarely noticed. It consists of directing the movements of actors or dancers on a stage or film set, so that they are in exactly the right position at every moment of the drama and yet appear to be acting entirely of their own volition.

Simeon and Anna were regular temple-goers, but it was surely a ‘God-incidence’ that they should both be there at the precise moment that Joseph and Mary came to present the infant Jesus as their firstborn to the Lord. ‘Moved by the Spirit, Simeon went into the temple courts,’ and was able to take Jesus into his arms and sing about the salvation that was to come not just to the people of Israel but to all the nations of the world.

The Holy Spirit has been called ‘the great Choreographer’. ‘When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman.’ At the right time, too, ‘God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts’ to make us his children (Galatians 4:4, 6).

Waiting for God’s next move, trusting him to know the right time – if he can manage so expertly the arrival of his own Son into the world, and the whole process of our individual coming to faith, we can surely rely on him to choreograph the lesser details of our life. It is all part of his great plan, and he knows what he is doing.

At whatever stage of life I am, I can trust the Holy Spirit to ‘move’ me along the path of his will. Lord, you know about the big moments of my life – even the time and manner of my death – give me the passion and the patience to play my part in your kingdom drama.