

4:1 GUARANTEE

When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession.
Ephesians 1:13-14

The glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.
Colossians 1:27

The BSI 'kitemark' (named because of its inverted triangular shape) is a guarantee of the genuineness and top quality of the goods that carry it. A kite-marked item will have been rigorously checked and tested applying the highest possible standards.

How do I know if I'm a genuine Christian? Can I be certain that I'm heading for the 'glory' of receiving God's inheritance kept for me in heaven (1 Peter 1:4)? Do I really belong to God – or am I just 'flying a kite', carrying a badge of quality on the outside but having no corresponding reality within?

In the Gospels Jesus often lays into the pious Pharisees who maintain an outward show of prayer, fasting and charitable giving but are full of rottenness – including murderous thoughts towards him! Paul (who was himself a born and bred Pharisee) had to lie in the dust before Jesus and admit how totally wrong he was. Then he was given the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17). Even then, the other disciples couldn't be sure he was a true convert, until Barnabas convinced them that Jesus had spoken to him on the Damascus road.

To hear and respond to Jesus' word, to receive Christ into my life, and to receive the Holy Spirit, are one and the same thing. It is the way I become a new person, destined for a glorious future.

Quality in, quality out. If I bear the royal kitemark of Christ, my life today ought to reflect his character. Do I ring true? What am I trying to get away with? Isn't it rather amazing that God should have put his seal on me, knowing what I'm like? Please may I not let him down.

4:2 LIFE AND DEATH

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.
Matthew 7:13-14

Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.
Galatians 6:8

Once heard, never forgotten. Jesus' parable of the two gates and two roads lodges like a fishbone in the throat and disturbs our complacency. Am I among the few or the many? However far down the road I may have travelled, which road am I on?

He isn't talking about profession or badge-wearing. You can say 'Lord, Lord' and still receive his verdict 'I never knew you' (Matthew 7:21-23). He isn't talking about the size of the church you belong to, or the correctness of the doctrine you adhere to. He is talking about the consistent motivational direction of your whole life.

God hasn't changed the rules. The law is still 'Love God, love your neighbour' (Matthew 22:37-40). Most people don't – that is the plain fact. But now Christ has come, what has changed? Two things: the forgiveness of the cross, and the gift of the Spirit.

I love the Lord my God above any other false god, because he sent his Son to die for me. That's how serious it was. I love people in preference to myself, because his Spirit in me makes the impossible possible. Jesus and Paul use the same life-and-death language. What is the internal direction of your heart? Which road are you really on?

'The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace' (Romans 8:6). I can't escape this challenge, or laugh it aside. It's the fishbone in my throat. Who am I really living for today?

4:3 SPIRIT AND CLAY

God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.... The Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.
Genesis 1:26, 2:7

The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life.... I am the same as you in God's sight; I too am a piece of clay.
Job 33:4, 6

The young man Elihu is trying to dismantle Job's self-righteousness, so he starts with a meditation on Genesis. Man and woman are created 'in God's image' and likeness; they are also made from 'the dust of the ground', from 'clay'. On one hand they are called into eternal relationship with the Divine; on the other they are part of the physical and biological creation.

Spirit and Word are directly involved at both levels. In the beginning the Spirit and the word of God are both agents of creation (Genesis 1:2, 3; John 1:3). What God commands, the Spirit actualises. In giving us our Divine image and our earthly nature, the Creator speaks forth life and the Spirit imparts it. We are dependent on him from start to finish. To forget this is to lose our life, both heavenly and earthly.

This teaches us boldness and humility. Job has been bold in asserting his right to justify himself before God, but he has not been humble enough to realise his creatureliness and frailty. We are right to respond eagerly to the heavenly calling into fellowship with God, but wrong to pursue it in the assumed strength of our own merits.

I am not the product of mathematics or physics; I am Fathered and Mothered, and if I am in Christ, I am also Brothered (Hebrews 2:11).

'Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there' (Psalm 139:7-8). Have I forgotten my double dependence on you at the spiritual and physical levels of my being?

4:4 STRENGTHENED

The Spirit of the Lord will come powerfully upon you, and you will be changed into a different person. *1 Samuel 10:6*

The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength.

2 Timothy 4:17

My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.

Psalms 119:28

Saul, the future king of Israel, may have stood taller than his contemporaries in physique, but he had a timid and distrustful nature. He was given God's Spirit for a particular purpose, but sadly this endowment didn't last and the old Saul returned.

Those who put their trust in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit become new people in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). This is a permanent rebirth, not a temporary infilling. However, there may be occasions when we need a specific injection of spiritual power for a situation where we would otherwise be out of our depth.

This happened to Paul the apostle when on trial before the emperor Nero in Rome. Everyone else had deserted him, he says, but the Lord Jesus stood by him and he was able to proclaim the good news in front of all kinds of important people (2 Timothy 4:17).

It happened to me, too, when I was on my own (also in Rome!) and was approached by a menacing gang of youths. I prayed quickly and found myself shouting at them in a language I had never used before; they looked horrified and parted to let me through.

It happens to those whose souls are 'weary with sorrow', whether they have just received a dose of bad news, or when things have multiplied to get on top of them. They claim a relevant promise from God, and receive emotional or moral resources at the point of need.

'Be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord' (Psalm 27:14). My emotions are a poor guide in times of trouble; they let me down more often than not. I don't have to feel strong in order to find the Holy Spirit's help; just 'trust in him, and he will act' (Psalm 37:5).

4:5 THE GIFT OF FAITH

To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:8-9

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have what we asked of him.

1 John 5:14-15

Faith isn't a feeling. It is laying hold (sometimes desperately) of God's promises in order for something to happen. It is usually expressed in a prayer. We may have uttered our first ever prayer of faith when we asked Jesus to come into our lives. We have probably uttered many a prayer of faith since, in difficulty, in perplexity, in longing. Praying in faith is standard practice for a Christian.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul isn't talking about standard practice, but about special gifts given by God for the building up of the church. One of these is 'faith,' the firm conviction that God will act in a particular way which will bring blessing or deliverance. Jesus himself had this gift, for instance at the raising of Lazarus from death: he thanks his Father for hearing him, then calls in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' Result? The dead man comes out. Who expected that?

So have we got to feel a rock-solid 'confidence' before we pray? Jesus told us to be as outrageous as we like in approaching God (Luke 11:9), as long as it isn't contrary to his expressed will as our heavenly Father, like feeding our children with scorpions. 'It's not great faith in God you need, but faith in a great God' (Hudson Taylor). If it seems he hasn't fulfilled his promise, tell him to his face, – as Paul does, and gets a wonderful response (2 Corinthians 12:9).

I mustn't try to manipulate God, however serious the situation. I must pray in full confidence that he hears, then leave the result to him. If he chooses to give me a special belief that the answer will come, great! He will always do 'far more than we ask or imagine' (Ephesians 3:20).

4:6 THE HAND OF GOD

But (Joseph's) bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed supple, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel. Genesis 49:24

Where is he who set his Holy Spirit among them, who sent his glorious arm of power to be at Moses' right hand?

Isaiah 63:11-12

'The Hand of God' passed into footballing history with Maradona's illegal goal in the World Cup of 1986. It is originally a Biblical phrase carrying tremendous encouragement for all Christians. If we follow Christ we will be taken into situations which are beyond our natural power to deal with. But the Bible promises God's ordinary people exceptional reserves for survival and victory, to the glory of God.

This was true for Joseph, left in a pit by his own brothers, and later sent unjustly to jail by a scheming woman. He is compared to a bowman ambushed by a band of hostile archers: his plight is desperate, yet he finds God's own hands, as it were, strengthening his own as he shoots back and demolishes the enemy one by one.

It was true of Moses, facing the armies of Pharaoh with his back to the Red Sea, or lifting his sagging hands in prayer as his soldiers battled in the valley: he found God's timely help available, with thanks also to his faithful friends, but principally thanks to the electrical energy of the Holy Spirit delivering superhuman power.

It is still true today. Miracles happen, not only conference-worthy stories of healing and deliverance but experiences of Divine assistance that never make the headlines. Yes, there is hype and there may be heartbreak, but many Christians can testify first-hand to a God who hasn't let them down at moments of great crisis.

When Nehemiah's enemies are trying to frighten him into stopping the work on the walls of Jerusalem, he prays, 'Now strengthen my hands' (Nehemiah 6:9). If the Old Testament people of faith found they could trust the invisible God, how much more can we who are 'strengthened with power through his Spirit in our inner being' (Ephesians 3:16)?