

*“Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road .... Has sent me that you may be ....filled with the Holy Spirit” Acts 9:17*

Jesus revealed himself in his ascended glory to Paul on the road to Damascus. That event was the first foundation of Paul's spiritual life. Three days later Jesus sent Ananias with a commission to speak to Paul about his calling. That was the second foundation of his spiritual life. Ananias was also told by Jesus to lay hands on Paul so that he might be filled with the Holy Spirit. In the receiving of the Holy Spirit, a third crucial foundation was laid. Not surprisingly, just as he refers constantly to the revelation of Jesus and the call of Jesus in his letters, so he refers to the presence and work of the Spirit. These references bear witness to Paul's vibrant experience of the Spirit, an experience on which is based his understanding and teaching of the Spirit.

#### **The Spirit and Paul's growth in godliness.**

Perhaps the most profound way in which the Spirit of Jesus impinged on Paul's life relates to Paul's great longing for godliness and righteousness. It seems evident that even as a Pharisee and before he met Jesus, Paul (Saul as he was then) eagerly sought after righteousness. He believed in the laws of Moses and longed to be obedient to them. He was a “God-fearer” in a true sense; he was deeply committed to the godly behaviour required by the law. He saw his attempts at righteous behaviour as the means whereby he would gain acceptance from God and would be included among the righteous. His antagonism to Christians and to Jesus lay in his belief that they were opponents of such God-given law and were undermining it. By temperament he was desperately zealous, incredibly self-disciplined, very energetic and very focused on achieving his goals. He epitomised to a remarkable degree the deeply religious person whose aim was to be righteous and was determined to use every bit of his own personal human resources to achieve that end. He was the model of those who sought righteousness of behaviour by “means of the law”.

Paul's meeting with Jesus exploded this whole outlook. Paul knew immediately he met Jesus that he had been accepted simply by grace, his hostility freely forgiven. His own efforts in the law had led him along nothing but a blind path that was actually contrary to God. He now knew with a profound insight just how wrong and futile his self-efforts were to gain righteousness. He had put everything he had into that endeavour but it had fallen grossly short. The fact was that he had completely underestimated just how strong were his own innate tendencies to do wrong. Now he could see the depth of sin that lay in his inner being, and how humanly intractable it was. He had experienced the fact that a revelation of Jesus always brings a revelation of the deep needs of a person's inner sinful self; sin is so deeply embedded in humanity that self-effort simply cannot bring about the degree of change that is required for true righteous living. Something extra is required.

**The answer to Paul's life problem lay in the Holy Spirit**

Nowhere does this radical re-appraisal of his personal situation come out more vividly than in Paul's letter to the Romans. He pungently describes his moral failure: *“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members”*. Rom 7:18-23. Such was Paul's testimony. He had longed to do what was right, he had recognized that the law of God was right, but now he had come to see that the problem of sin was so deep that he could not do what he so desired to do. There was nothing wrong with the law; the problem lay in him. Left to himself he would always fail, always be judged unrighteous.

It was part of the grace of God, however, that Paul at the same time came to realise that God had made provision for this very problem. The answer lay in the presence of the Holy Spirit who had now entered into and filled his life. Here, in the Holy Spirit, was the foundation for a totally new and effective righteousness. This was wonderfully releasing, an escape from a “living death” (*the law of sin and death* Rom 8:2)). The simple truth was that the Holy Spirit now living in him was stronger than the power of sin. There was a flow of great desire for godliness and a release of power that enabled godly living. The death of Jesus, a sin offering, had broken the stranglehold of sin in his life, and the Spirit was making that fact a vivid reality to him. These are the experiential truths that he describes in Rom 8:1-4. Paul had learned a new and real way to holiness - the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit at work in those who accepted Jesus and what he had done at Calvary.

This new life in Jesus, therefore, was not one of self-effort, but one of dependence on the Spirit, one of learning how to put to death the promptings of the flesh by the power of the indwelling Spirit. It was a life of living by the Spirit and being led by the Spirit. Such a life bore the *“fruit of the Spirit in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”* (Gal 5:22).

This transforming experience of Paul is also reflected vividly in 2 Corinthians 3. There (v7) he refers to the old covenant of the Law as a *“ministry that brought death”* and *“condemnation”*, for there was no hope of human nature rising to the task of obeying the moral law. By contrast the ministry of the Spirit, the new covenant, brought life and freedom by virtue of the inner power that it released in humanity: *“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. And we .... are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit”* (vv17-18). Paul knew only too well the freedom of the new covenant of the Spirit.

## The Spirit and Paul the man of Prayer

There seems every probability that when Ananias laid hands on him and Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit that he spoke in tongues and prophesied. Acts makes it clear that speaking in tongues was frequently an immediate consequence of being filled with the Spirit. It was the case on the day of Pentecost, it happened to Cornelius and to converts in Ephesus. Paul certainly did speak in tongues, and there is no real reason to attribute the start of that practice to any other point in his life. Paul testifies to speaking in tongues with the words, *"I thank my God that I speak in tongues more than all of you"* (1 Cor. 14:18). It was something that he was thankful for, something that he did frequently and, if we date it back to his meeting with Ananias, something he had practised for some two decades. He had a simple reason for being thankful, and gives it as follows: *"He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself"* (1 Cor. 14:4). To "edify" is to "build up", and Paul was acknowledging the practice as a way in which he had built himself up spiritually. The reason why tongues speaking should edify he explains in a further phrase, *"If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays"* (14:14). Praying is the supreme way of building up the spiritual life, and praying in tongues, a practice in which there is a direct contact of human spirit with divine Spirit, is a very powerful way of praying. It was not an exclusive, or even a superior way of praying for Paul, however, and he writes *"I will pray with my spirit; I will also pray with my mind"* (14:15). Paul was careful to distinguish between *"praying with the spirit"* and *"praying in the Spirit"* (Eph 6:18), since he knew that the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit could inform his praying in his ordinary language just as much as his praying with his own spirit. None the less he evidently valued it and had found great strength in it. This was the case even though he firmly refused to countenance its undisciplined use in the church meeting, where the first priority was to edify others and not to one's own self. Not surprisingly he refused the idea of forbidding the speaking in tongues (14:39).

All this amounts to the fact that Paul recognised how much the reality and strength of his praying owed to the presence of the Spirit. He encapsulates this in a remarkable testimony in Romans 8:26-27: *"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."* He is not referring to praying in tongues here, for praying in tongues is obviously praying in words whereas Paul describes *"groans which are beyond words"*. He is referring to the depth of concern that the Spirit himself feels for the saints and which he, Paul, had been allowed to feel as he interceded. At such times his heart felt much more than his words could express. Having said that, however, Paul, thankfully, was still able to express in words prayers of great depth of feeling and wisdom, prayers which break out even as he writes his letters: Eph 1:15ff and Eph. 3:14ff are supreme examples. The point is that his whole prayer life was infused and empowered by the Spirit of God, whether verbally or not, a profoundly important spiritual foundation.

### The ministry of the Spirit

Paul's apostolic ministry was equally infused and empowered by the Spirit of God. He who had been healed of blindness through Ananias became himself an instrument of healing. It is obvious from his discussion with the Corinthians about the gifts of the Spirit that he was very conversant with all the supernatural operations of the Spirit. He knew about prophesying, about healing, miracles, discernment of spirits etc. Moreover he knew about them with a degree of experience and maturity that enabled him to put them into an edifying context of humble body ministry. For him such operations of the Spirit were simply and solely to glorify Jesus. Wherever he went the signs of an apostle followed him. Such was the stuff of his ministry. What he rejoiced in, however, was not simply that the supernatural was present, but, much more profoundly, that God was at work doing things in such a way that people were released into a faith that enabled them to stand in the power of God and not in the wisdom of men. Paul told the Corinthians that when he first came to them, he came in fear and trembling, only too conscious of his own weaknesses, and that he came trusting in the preaching of the crucifixion of Jesus, and not in any wisdom of his own. He preached with a simple trust that the Spirit of God would move on the hearers in such a way that they would come to faith through what that Spirit did in them (1 Cor 2:1ff). This was Paul's great ministry method - he trusted the Spirit. Elsewhere he told the Corinthians that he needed no letters of recommendation because they themselves were his letters of recommendation, *"written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but tablets of human hearts"* 2 Cor 3:3. The godly change that had been wrought in their lives through the power of the Spirit was all that was needed to see that his ministry was genuine. That was Paul's great delight.

The Spirit was a living reality in Paul's life, not just a mental concept

The activity of the Holy Spirit was, therefore, something very recognisable, almost tangible, in his life. The Spirit was not a mere term of doctrine or vague concept in his mind but a living reality. Paul knew he was touching the reality of God in the transformation of his own behaviour, in the manifestation of supernatural gifts, in the release in him of power and ability as he proclaimed the gospel, and in the effect of the Spirit on those to whom he ministered. This presence inevitably brought to him a profound and constant reassurance of the certainty and truth of his message of forgiveness, restoration, resurrection and eternal life. The Spirit to him was a huge seal on the glory that would ultimately be his after his life and work was done. He knew he was constantly meeting the reality of God in no less a person than his Spirit here on earth, and this bore constant witness to him that he would without question, therefore, meet God in the fullness of his reality in the world to come. This thought comes frequently in his letters as he encouraged others to have the same assurance: *"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"* Eph 1:13; *"He anointed us, set his seal of ownership upon us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come"* 2 Cor 1:21-22. The Spirit was God's sign in Paul of the veracity of his message.

**It is a matter of great thankfulness that the same foundation of the fullness of the Spirit which Paul experienced is available for all Christians. It is a matter of equal importance that Christians avail themselves of it. No Christian life such as Jesus intends for us is possible unless this foundation is in place. It is the source of our godliness, our witness and our assurance.**