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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE SPIRIT-FILLED LIFE 2

In the last message, we reflected on some aspects of the Spirit-filled life: how to maintain and deepen the quality and meaning of the fullness of the Spirit, wrong notions about walking according to the Spirit and the issue of being filled afresh with the Holy Spirit.

Today, we will continue to reflect on some other aspects of the Spirit-filled life.

Wrong expectations of the Spirit-filled life

Believers may have the idea that if we experience the fullness of the Spirit, we will have a pleasant and easy life. There will be no complications or complexities. All problems would be quickly resolved as we look to the Lord and trust Him. Or at least, life should be easier and more pleasant.

However, after experiencing the fullness of the Spirit, we may actually find life to be more difficult and complex. We may experience more unpleasant situations and greater spiritual pressures and opposition. We may encounter problems that are difficult to overcome, painful and hard to bear.

Some may then ask, "If this is so, why enter into such a life? It is not attractive at all. Is this really the kind of life God wants us to experience?" We may become confused. And because of the significance of the issues, the evil one will try hard to confuse or even frighten us. It is important that we have a clear understanding of this subject so that we can cooperate with God, grow well and have a meaningful part in God's kingdom.

Difficulties and suffering in the Spirit-filled life

It is important to be clear that when we enter into the Spirit-filled life and are faithful in our walk with God, even though life may become more difficult and complex, it will be more meaningful and effective. We will live life at a higher plane and experience more deeply the life of abundance in the Lord Jesus. But what does it mean to have life that is abundant, more meaningful and effective?

To understand the issues involved in this area of truth, I will begin by pointing out two broad categories of difficulties and suffering that a person who is filled with the Spirit may go through.

One broad category is difficulties and suffering that are a result of disobedience, wrongdoing, half-heartedness, a divided heart. This kind of suffering often goes together with a sense of helplessness and hopelessness, misery and despair. It is a kind of suffering that serves no useful purpose, except to indicate to us that something is amiss in our lives which we need to put right.

The other category of difficulties and suffering is very different. It is difficulties and suffering experienced in the context of the Spirit-filled life and a life of faithfulness to God. A critical characteristic of this kind of difficulties and suffering is that there is purpose and meaning in it. It is accompanied by a deep sense of fellowship with God and His enabling. This is the kind of life where our hearts can continually experience the love, joy and peace of God, at a deep level, independent of circumstances. We are also bearing fruit in every good work even as our character is being transformed and our inner man renewed.

The apostle James tells us in James 1:2 to consider it all joy when we encounter various trials. We can rejoice because these trials, testing and difficulties have a positive direction – “that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:4). They are intended for our transformation and fruit-bearing.

God the master chef

God may be likened to a master chef who knows the perfect recipe for the perfect dish. He knows the different ingredients needed, the right proportions, the optimum temperature and the length of time needed to cook the dish. We may not understand why certain ingredients are needed. We may also think the heat is too high and would destroy the ingredients. But the master chef knows what he is doing and the outcome will be the perfect dish.

Likewise, the many different experiences that God allows us to go through are intended to bring about a very beautiful outcome. However, unlike the various ingredients which do not have a say, we can reject or try to avoid what God wants us to go through. We may also fail to go through the situations well. The outcome may not be good. But if we submit to God and cooperate with Him, something beautiful and meaningful will come about for our own lives and for the advancement of God’s kingdom.

Testimony of the apostle Paul

The apostle Paul and his co-workers experienced much opposition and persecution as they sought to serve the Lord. Paul shared his perspective on their trials and difficulties in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.

17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,
18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Paul was not discouraged because he knew his inner man was being renewed daily as he went through the afflictions with the Lord. He knew they were producing in him an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison. And even though the afflictions were severe at times, he considered them as "momentary" and "light" because he was seeing things from the eternal perspective.

The abundant life

If we are filled with the Spirit and are walking faithfully with the Lord, this kind of life can be our continuing experience. God's approval and blessings will be upon us and He will be with us. As we respond positively to God's guidance and enabling, we will learn much and our inner man will be renewed and strengthened.

What more can we ask for as true disciples of the Lord? Is this not the kind of life we should aim for – a life where God has the freedom to work in us, to transform us? And as we grow, we are also bearing fruit in every good work. This is the kind of life worth living. This is the abundant life that the Lord Jesus intends for each one of us. But it will not be an easy life.

True discipleship and the way of the Cross

The path of true discipleship involves the way of the Cross. The Lord Jesus suffered for us, leaving us an example to follow in His steps (1 Peter 2:21). If we want to be faithful to the Lord, we must not run away from the pain and suffering in the path of true discipleship.

The apostle Paul said: "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

Learn from the example of Paul

Let us briefly look at what Paul himself went through as he sought to be a faithful servant of the Lord.

2 Corinthians 11:23-27

23 Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death.

24 Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes.

25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.

26 I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren;

27 I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Here, Paul was talking about being true servants of Christ. How did Paul substantiate his claim of being a true servant of the Lord? What did he give as his credentials, the marks of a faithful servant of the Lord? A life of pleasantness, ease and comfort? No, his credentials as a faithful servant of the Lord were a life of much hardship, suffering and going through many dangerous situations. Nevertheless, it was a life that was extremely meaningful, rich and had the stamp of God's approval.

True for all faithful servants of the Lord

Some may think this kind of life is meant only for believers like the apostle Paul who had a special calling. Well, in 2 Corinthians 6, Paul draws all true servants of God in the same direction. He urges believers not to receive the grace of God in vain (v. 1). Then he says in verses 3 to 5:

2 Corinthians 6:3-5

3 giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited,

4 but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses,

5 in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger,

In these verses, Paul exhorts all believers to commend themselves as God's servants as they endure the afflictions, hardships and distresses that come upon them.

In the verses that follow, Paul makes clear these hardships and difficulties take place in the midst of faithful ministry of the word of truth in the power of God, and in lives that manifest purity, patience, kindness and righteousness in the Holy Spirit.

2 Corinthians 6:6-7

6 in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love,

7 in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left,

Paul then goes on to describe different kinds of experiences that such a servant of the Lord may go through.

2 Corinthians 6:8-10

8 by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true;

9 as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death,

10 as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.

Some may speak well of us, some may speak evil of us. We may appear to be sorrowful but we are actually always rejoicing. We may be poor materially, but we make many rich spiritually. We may seem to have nothing, but in the Lord we have abundance.

In the midst of spiritual warfare

We are living in a fallen world, locked in unceasing warfare with the forces of darkness. They seek to frustrate the fulfilment of God's purposes and will vigorously oppose the advancement of God's kingdom. When God's kingdom is advanced, it will be at the expense of the kingdom of darkness. It will involve the pulling down of the enemy's stronghold and fortresses and setting the captives free.

We face a formidable foe. He is like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. We have to be alert and fight the good fight of faith. This is not a game. This is for real and the issues are weighty, with eternal implications and consequences. We must not be complacent or presumptuous. Yet we need not be fearful or anxious. The Lord has made adequate provisions for us and we can be properly equipped. The victory has already been won by our Lord Jesus Christ at the Cross. We are assured of victory as we abide in Christ and overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loves us (Rom. 8:37). And greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4).

In the midst of spiritual warfare, pain and difficulties, we need not be perturbed, anxious or fearful. The Lord will be with us and His grace will be sufficient for us as we continue to trust Him and depend on Him. It is feasible for us to go through all situations with a deep sense of peace and joy in God and be assured that our labour in the Lord will not be in vain.

The Lord may grant us periods of relative ease and pleasantness

After experiencing the fullness of the Spirit, our life may not immediately become difficult or complex. It is possible that the Lord may grant us periods of relative ease and pleasantness, especially immediately after the initial experience of the fullness of the Spirit. Life may be smooth sailing and our heart is filled with peace and joy. There is a strong sense of God's presence, His guidance and enabling.

But we must not think that life will always be like that and we then become complacent or presumptuous. We must make the most of such a time to build a

strong foundation in the Lord and in the truth, so as to prepare and be ready for whatever may lie ahead.

If we begin to experience significant difficulties and spiritual pressures after a period of time, do not be unduly disturbed or troubled. Do not conclude that something must be amiss. Just make sure there is no ground given, no wrong approach to life, no unsound understanding of issues that the evil one can take advantage of. Evaluate our lives from time to time. It is important we do not become discouraged because of the difficulties and pressures. Put right what needs to be put right and continue to fulfil what we understand God desires of us, in dependence on Him and trusting Him. He will be with us and He will guide and undertake.

Fullness of the Spirit does not mean spiritual maturity

When we experience the baptism with the Holy Spirit and the fullness of the Spirit, it does not mean we have become spiritually mature. We can be baptised and filled with the Spirit in a moment, but to attain spiritual maturity, we need to go through a process.

Ephesians 4:13

until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

Paul in this context is talking about God giving apostles, prophets and teachers to the church to equip the saints and build up the body of Christ towards full maturity. That is the direction, the goal, and it takes time to attain to maturity.

Colossians 1:28

We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

In this verse, Paul is expressing a major concern of his heart, the goal of his ministry, which is "to present every man complete in Christ". The word "complete" is the same word translated "mature" in Ephesians 4:13. It takes time for us to grow unto maturity. In fact, we never attain full maturity on earth. Even until the end of his life, Paul was still striving in that direction for his own life (Phil. 3).

Though the experience of the fullness of the Spirit does not make us spiritually mature, nonetheless, the experience is vital in helping us grow well towards spiritual maturity. It increases the rate, meaning and quality of growth. The quality and richness of our experience of the fullness of the Spirit will make a difference to how well we grow towards spiritual maturity. And likewise, how well we continue to respond to the Spirit's teaching and working in our lives will have a bearing.

Fullness of the Spirit does not mean no deficiencies and weaknesses

When we experience the baptism with the Holy Spirit and are filled with the Spirit, it does not mean we no longer have deficiencies and weaknesses. We will still have deficiencies and weaknesses that are not fully resolved or dealt with, especially those we are not so conscious of. With passing time, God allows them to surface to our consciousness and He expects us to deal with them. He often allows them to surface as we go through difficult situations. Such times may reveal our fears, anxieties, pride, anger or impatience.

In such contexts, we should not be taken aback and wrongly conclude that we have degenerated and so become discouraged. The deficiencies and weaknesses may have been there all along. It is just that we were not so conscious of them.

We should also not ignore or pretend that the deficiencies and weaknesses are not present, or try to rationalise and justify ourselves.

If we harden our hearts, we will grieve the Holy Spirit and will not be able to develop well. And if we persist in hardening our hearts, there may come a time when we are no longer filled with the Spirit. There may be ugly and jarring features in us, yet we still project ourselves as if we are spiritual and relate to others in a condescending manner. We may still mouth clichés and spiritual phrases, but there is no corresponding reality in our life. Much unnecessary difficulties, pain and suffering come from such personal failures and negative responses.

It is therefore important that we acknowledge and face our deficiencies properly. We must look to the Lord to help us resolve them. Only then will our heart become increasingly pure and will we grow in spiritual stature.

The revelation of our weaknesses and deficiencies is an important aspect in the process of growth and transformation. It can help us to have a more accurate understanding of ourselves, and we will then be more able to take steps to deal with these weaknesses and deficiencies. It can also help us to be humble and teachable.

Walk by faith and not by sight

As we seek to live a Spirit-filled life, we must learn to walk by faith and not by sight. We must not walk according to outward appearance of things but according to reality. We must not walk according to how we feel but on the basis of truth we have come to understand. We must walk according to the Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth.

We must become men and women of faith and conviction, properly grounded on true knowledge of God and the Scriptures. We live according to our recognition of who God is and what He desires and we trust Him to enable us. In times of perplexities, we do not deviate from the path of truth and faithfulness. We continue to trust God and live according to His will because we know there is meaning and purpose in what

we are going through. And we know He is the sovereign Lord who loves us and undertakes for our lives.

Understanding theological issues and experiencing spiritual reality

We may be unclear about the theological issues pertaining to the baptism with the Holy Spirit and the fullness of the Spirit, yet experience the fullness of the Spirit. What is most important is having healthy attitudes and approach to life. What is important is that we consecrate our life to God, recognise our need of Him and look to Him to empower us to live for Him.

On the other hand, we may have a mental understanding of the theological issues but fail to respond appropriately and do not experience the reality of the fullness of the Spirit.

This is true also in conversion. We may not know much about the theology of conversion, but deep within our hearts, we have repented of our sins, trusted in the Lord Jesus and decided to follow Him. And so we are born of the Spirit and have the life of God within us.

On the other hand, some may be familiar with the gospel, having heard it many times, but are not born of the Spirit because they have not truly responded to God in true repentance and faith.

But having said that, we must recognise that having a good grasp of the meaning and issues in relation to conversion and the fullness of the Spirit is very helpful for our own lives and as we seek to help others.

A clear understanding of the relevant issues in relation to conversion helps us to communicate the gospel effectively, and help others towards true conversion. A good understanding of the subject of the fullness of the Spirit helps us to respond deeply to the Lord and enter into a rich experience of the fullness of the Spirit, and know how to continue on well from there. It also enables us to know how to help others do likewise.

Can we experience the baptism with the Holy Spirit more than once?

In an earlier message (AR181), I made a distinction between "baptism with the Holy Spirit" and "being filled with the Spirit". I mentioned that "baptism with the Holy Spirit" may be a reference to the experience when Christ baptises us with the Holy Spirit whereas "being filled with the Spirit" describes its immediate consequence. That is, baptism with the Holy Spirit takes place at that moment when the Lord Jesus baptises us with the Holy Spirit. The fullness of the Spirit, however, is a reality we need to maintain. It should not be an experience of a moment, but a continuing and abiding reality. This means that we can properly talk about being filled and continue

to be filled with the Spirit. But as far as I can understand, it is not appropriate to talk about being baptised with and continue to be baptised with the Spirit.

In that message however, I did not address the issue as to whether we can experience the baptism with the Holy Spirit more than once. This is the issue I now want to address.

The distinction that I have just mentioned between "baptism with the Holy Spirit" and "being filled with the Spirit" is clearer to me. Whether the term "baptism with the Holy Spirit" is correctly used to refer only to our first experience of the fullness of the Holy Spirit is not so clear to me, nor very important. Nevertheless, I will consider with you five possible ways in which the term "baptism with the Holy Spirit" may be used.

1. A believer under the New Covenant experiences the baptism with the Holy Spirit only once and it results in his first experience of the fullness of the Spirit. Subsequent experiences of the fullness of the Spirit are termed "being filled with the Spirit" rather than "baptism with the Holy Spirit".

2. A believer can experience the baptism with the Holy Spirit more than once. That is, when the Lord Jesus baptises us with the Holy Spirit for the first time, we are filled with the Spirit. But we may subsequently grieve the Holy Spirit, so that we are no longer filled. When we re-consecrate our life to the Lord, we experience afresh the fullness of the Holy Spirit. That fresh experience of the fullness of the Spirit may be termed "baptism with the Holy Spirit".

3. A believer can experience the baptism with the Holy Spirit more than once. However, unlike [2], his subsequent fresh experience of the fullness of the Spirit is not because of a failure to maintain the fullness of the Spirit. Rather, it is in the context of a significantly deeper response to the Lord, resulting in life in the Holy Spirit at a higher plane. Such subsequent fresh experiences of the fullness of the Spirit may be termed "baptism with the Holy Spirit". There can be several such experiences and stages in our spiritual development.

4. This possibility is a combination of [2] and [3]. That is, the term "baptism with the Holy Spirit" can be used to refer to our first experience of the fullness of the Spirit and also subsequent fresh experiences of the fullness of the Spirit, whether they are due to failure to maintain the fullness of the Spirit or because of a deeper response to the Lord.

5. We can and ought to experience many baptisms with the Holy Spirit. That is, every fresh experience of the Holy Spirit is termed "baptism with the Holy Spirit". We can be filled afresh with the Holy Spirit because of failure to maintain the fullness of the Spirit, or because of a significantly deeper response, or from time to time, we affirm our love for Him, our consecration to Him and we look to the Lord to fill us afresh with the Holy Spirit. All these experiences can be termed "baptism with the

Holy Spirit". If we use the term "baptism with the Holy Spirit" in this way, this possibility would include [2] and [3].

Although I have listed five possibilities for the scriptural usage of the term "baptism with the Holy Spirit", at present I am more inclined to the first possibility, then the fourth, second, third and fifth. Here I am not merely discussing personal preferences in the way we use the term. I am referring to the meaning of the term as used in the Scriptures and using the term in a way consistent with the scriptural pattern.

I am more inclined to the view that the "baptism with the Holy Spirit" refers to a believer's first experience of the fullness of the Holy Spirit because this seems to be the way the Scriptures uses the term.

For example, when the disciples experienced the Lord filling them with the Holy Spirit for the first time on the day of Pentecost, the event was described as being baptised with the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:5.

Acts 1:5

for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

Likewise in Acts 11:15-16, Peter also described Cornelius' first experience of the filling with the Holy Spirit as being baptised with the Holy Spirit.

Acts 11:15-16

15 "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.

16 "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

Although I can see the meaningfulness of using the term "baptism with the Holy Spirit" to refer to possibilities [4], [2], [3] and [5], especially [4], [2] and [3] which are quite close, I do not feel so free to say it is any of these because I do not have scriptural support for using the term "baptism with the Holy Spirit" to refer to other than a believer's first experience of the fullness of the Spirit.

In the Scriptures, subsequent experiences of the fullness of the Spirit are described as "filled with the Holy Spirit". As far as I am aware, the term "baptism with the Holy Spirit" is never used for subsequent experiences of the fullness of the Spirit. I will give three examples.

Acts 4:31

And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.

We have seen in the previous message that many, if not all of these believers who were filled with the Holy Spirit had already experienced the baptism with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Their subsequent experience of the fullness of the Holy Spirit here was described as “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” rather than “they were baptised with the Holy Spirit”.

Acts 4:8

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people,

Similarly in this context, Peter had also experienced the fullness of the Spirit after he was baptised with the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The indication here is that he was being filled afresh. The phrase “filled with the Holy Spirit” can also be translated as “having just been filled” (margin of NASB). This subsequent experience of the fullness of the Spirit was not described as “baptism with the Holy Spirit” but “filled with the Holy Spirit”.

Acts 13:9

But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him,

In this verse, the phrase “filled with the Holy Spirit” can also be translated as “having just been filled” (margin of NASB). We have considered this verse before, that Paul was here likely to be receiving more of the Spirit. And it was described as “filled with the Holy Spirit”. The term “baptism with the Holy Spirit” was not used.

Although the Scriptures uses the expression “baptism with the Holy Spirit” only for a believer’s first experience of the fullness of the Spirit, this in no way detracts from or minimises the significance of the realities mentioned in [2], [3] and [5]. The issue here is one of terminology. It is about how and when the term “baptism with the Holy Spirit” is used in the Scriptures. It is not about the significance of the spiritual realities involved in this area of the baptism with the Holy Spirit and the fullness of the Spirit.

Concluding remarks

Let us seek the Lord to help us have a good grasp of the issues pertaining to the baptism with the Holy Spirit and the fullness of the Spirit. Let us confess our sins, consecrate our lives to the Lord, and affirm our love for Him and faith in Him. Let us ask Him to fill us afresh with the Spirit, that we may live well for Him and truly please Him.

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