

Week 3: The Presence

The late Dr. Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ told this story of a famous oil field called Yates Pool:

“During the Depression this field was a sheep ranch owned by a man named Yates. Mr. Yates wasn’t able to make enough on his ranching operation to pay the principal and interest on the mortgage, so he was in danger of losing his ranch. With little money for clothes or food, his family (like many others) had to live on government subsidy.

“Day after day, as he grazed his sheep over those rolling West Texas hills, he was no doubt greatly troubled about how he would pay his bills. Then a seismographic crew from an oil company came into the area and told him there might be oil on his land. They asked permission to drill a wildcat well, and he signed a lease contract.

“At 1,115 feet they struck a huge oil reserve. The first well came in at 80,000 barrels a day. Many subsequent wells were more than twice as large. In fact, thirty years after the discovery, a government test of one of the wells showed it still had the potential flow of 125,000 barrels of oil a day.

“And Mr. Yates owned it all. The day he purchased the land he had received the oil and mineral rights. Yet he’d been living on relief. He was a multi-millionaire living in poverty. The problem? He didn’t know the oil was there even though he owned it.”*

I think that many Christians today—though they have salvation through Jesus Christ—are still living in spiritual poverty because they haven’t begun to live in the power of God’s presence within them. It is as though we are living in the land of Christianity, but unaware

that beneath the surface—in the depths of our souls—there are riches at our disposal which God has made available to us.

Two weeks ago we talked about God’s promise and desire to be *with* us. From cover to cover the Bible talks about God’s steps to have that relationship with you and with me. Last week, we looked at our *choice* to be with him—that it isn’t pushed on us, but that we make the decision on whether or not to be *with him*.

After that decision is made, how do we move toward living in God’s riches instead of in spiritual poverty? The very premise of our adventure during these six weeks is that we desire a closer relationship with God, right?

Do you know one of the most amazing verses in the Bible? It’s John 16:7. It is when Jesus tells his disciples that instead of coming closer to them, he is going away from them. As he tries to prepare them for his departure, he says these words:

“I tell you the truth: it is for your good that I am going away.”

Just for a moment, consider the disciples’ shock. Imagine if you were in their place.

Your life has been turned upside down by this man.

For three years you’ve been captivated by his every word.

You lived to hear him teach.

You lived to watch him heal.

You lived to see him love.

You left everything to follow him, convinced that he held the key to the future of the human race. You’ve bet the farm on it.

And now he says he’s going to leave? That’s the end of your world!

You’ve sacrificed everything for him ... and now you’re going to lose him!

But then Jesus has the audacity to add: “—*and it’s a good thing.*”

Sure. Kind of like what parents say before they spank their child: “This is going to hurt you, but it’s good for you.”

But Jesus is quite serious and gives the reason why it’s a good thing that he leaves. He says: “Because unless I go away, the counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”

Now I want you to think about that for a moment. That’s a staggering statement.

We often think: “I’d give anything to have lived when Jesus did—to hear his voice; to see his face; to watch him perform miracles.”

But Jesus says, “No. It is better to live in the era of the Spirit than it is to walk with me on the earth.” Jesus is saying we are more fortunate than the disciples were. You and I have an advantage over those who actually walked with him!

Since Jesus says it, it must be true ... so doesn’t it make sense that if we want to be close to God we had better thoroughly know and lean on the person of the Holy Spirit? Shouldn’t we be crystal clear on his identity and ministry?

For Christ-followers to miss this would be disaster.

In the Bible, the image Jesus uses of the Spirit in our life is a river.

Take a look with me at John 7:37–39:

“On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.”

The King James version reads: “Out of his belly will flow rivers of living water.”

The word that's used for "belly" is *koilios*—it means the "center of your being; the deepest part of your authentic self." The belly is that place that gets tied up in knots when you're anxious, where squadrons of butterflies fly in formation when you're afraid, where you are angry, or unsatisfied, or unhappy.

You may be able to manage your face. You maybe be able to make it look confident when you're dying inside. You may fool people by forcing your body language to appear relaxed when you're under stress. But your belly is not fooled. It is your inner core. It is where every major emotion gets registered. It is where you carry the real truth about strength and weakness with which you face life.

Jesus is basically saying, "If you follow me right down in your guts, your belly—you will be flowing with energy, hope, love, and power."

Did you notice in verse 39 what this picture of flowing waters stands for? The Holy Spirit. This new kind of life is tied to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. He's in you.

For the most part, Israel is desert. The audience to whom Jesus was speaking didn't see many rivers. What they saw were wadis—troughs that ran through the sand. Wadis were usually just dry gulches, but after a rain storm they would be filled with water.

So for the people Jesus was teaching in Israel, a full river is life. The opposite, a dry gulch, is death.

The Bible uses the images of rivers and streams to depict spiritual reality: there is a flow of God's presence and power that gives life.

For example, Psalm 46:4 reads, "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God...."

In Jeremiah 17:7–8 the prophet wrote:

“But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

If a river flows unobstructed, all kinds of good things will happen. It will nourish trees. It provides a home for fish and plants. It gives drinking water to human beings.

But if a river gets dammed up; if it gets blocked, obstructed, polluted, cut off—there’s death:

*“As the deer pants for the water,
So my soul pants for you, O God.”* (Psalm 42:1)

In the desert country, when all the wadis are dried up, a deer is going to die if it doesn’t find water.

The way this applies to our lives is to understand that it is not primarily a statement about our level of desire. It’s not primarily talking about how much we want to come to church and sing songs of worship.

It’s a simple observation of fact. It is the predicament of the human race, even if we’re not aware of it. If the water—availability of Spirit—is blocked off, we will experience loss, unsatisfied desire, spiritual death.

We see this again in the very last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22:1–2:

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

From the opening scene of Genesis to the closing chapter of Revelation, God creates, redeems, and then re-creates a world that is to be full of life. The life he creates and offers flows like the power and purity of a river.

Jesus says that he came so that you would be filled with life—that if someone asked how you're doing you would say, "I'm living the most complete, filled up, God-centered, peaceful, empowered life you could imagine." I wonder how many of us would answer that way today?

Let's look at exactly what Jesus said. Turn in your Bibles to John 10:10...

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

Over the years I've noticed something quite interesting. In some churches almost the only thing they say about Jesus is how he'll get you into heaven after you die. They don't elaborate much about life on this side of heaven. It's almost like a fatalistic, foregone conclusion that we simply slog along until we finally die and go to heaven.

Yet when you read the Gospels Jesus almost never talks about getting people into heaven. Jesus talks about getting people into *life*.

Of course that includes life beyond the grave. But it always starts here.

Who does the thief represent? The thief is the Evil One, Satan. We should expect opposition as Christ followers, but not be fearful of it. The Bible reminds us that "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." (1 John 4:4)

Turn to any book in the New Testament, and you see this picture of amazing life painted. For example, 1 Peter 1:8 says:

"Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy."

A little later Peter says of the people he's writing:

"You have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers." (1 Peter 1:22)

Peter is saying that these first-century Christians have rid themselves of malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. They have humbled themselves under God's mighty hand.

How many here would say this pretty much describes you?

That you are filled with inexpressible joy?

You are ridding yourself of malice, deceit, hypocrisy, and slander?

When people are around you, they notice your belly is flowing with rivers of living water?

If you've more or less mastered humility—raise your hand!

Here's what I think happens.

Many people hear about the good news of Jesus Christ. They are overwhelmed by this vision of hope, and they say, "Yes! I want Jesus in my life!"

And so, for a time, there's a kind of honeymoon period. They are drawn toward Scripture in a new way. They get excited and want to tell other people about Jesus. They love to worship.

And some things change in their life. Coarse language gets cleaned up. Certain addictions may be overcome. They get involved in serving in the church.

But over time this process of change seems to stall. And instead of my life looking like this amazing picture painted in the New Testament, it looks like this:

—I yell at my children.

—I worry too much about money and my job.

—I get jealous of people more successful or attractive than me.

—I use deception to get out of trouble.

—I pass judgment on people all the time.

When I read the New Testament words about putting off the old nature and being a new creature in Christ, I'm not jumping with joy at the change. Instead of feeling inspired by them, these words make me feel discouraged or guilty or confused or just tired.

I get overwhelmed with all the stuff I'm supposed to do. And so I'm stuck with this gap of what I'm supposed to be as a Christian and what I'm actually experiencing. Have you ever been there?

Do you know what people do when they're not closing the gap? These are real strategies.

A lot of people *try harder*.

They think, "The problem with this gap in my life is I'm just not being heroic enough in my effort."

I see this in a lot of you. "I'll close the gap by sheer spiritual elbow grease—I'll get up earlier, pray longer, read another book, listen to more tapes, learn new disciplines, serve more, work hard to be nicer to my family."

Then you hear about somebody else who gets up at 4 a.m. to pray, and you feel guilty—so you resolve to do that too. Even though you're not a morning person.

Even though at 4 a.m. you're dazed and confused and groggy and grumpy and nobody wants to be around you. Even Jesus doesn't want to be with you at 4 in the morning!

But you say to yourself, "This is hard, exhausting, and miserable—so it must be spiritual."

You do your absolute best to keep it up for days, weeks, or even months—but you can't sustain it. And when you stop, you feel guilty. Pretty soon you start something else.

I'll tell you a secret that deep inside you may already know, but are afraid to admit—
You're tired. Not just physically tired. You are weary in your soul.

You are one of those to whom to whom Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Those are confusing words to you right now, because for you, coming to Jesus is exhausting. But he wants to close the gap. He wants you to experience rivers of water ... the Spirit ... flowing through you. And trying harder isn't going to sustain you in your journey.

Other people who aren't closing the gap between who they should be in Christ and who they are simply *pretend*.

They know they're supposed to be different, so they decide to “fake it till they make it.”

When you talk to them, their life is a miracle a minute. They smile a lot. Every prayer gets answered. Every decision is a word from God. Every sentence ends with “praise the Lord.”

These Christians get good at impression management. One woman John Ortberg knows had a son who was going through severe depression. But his depression violated the family image of everything they were trying to portray as “Christian.” And do you know what her counsel was to her son? She told him to smile because “fake happiness is better than genuine depression.”

For the pretenders, inside ... when everything's quiet ... and they're alone—the gap's still there.

Others try to close the gap by *rededication*.

One of the places you'll especially see this in some churches is in their youth groups. John Ortberg experienced this quite often when he grew up. Here's how he describes it:

“We’d be sitting around a campfire and the speaker would tell a real emotional story. He’d say, ‘Last year, there was a group of teenagers who were driving home *from this very camp* who got in a car crash and died.’

“Every year it was the same story. By the end of high school it was amazing we had any teenagers left to go to camp—they apparently kept dying in crashes on the way home!

“But the rededication didn’t close the gap between who we knew we were supposed to be and who we were.”

Some people try to close the gap by *switching spiritual venues*.

I have seen this hundreds of times.

Somebody grows up in a non-charismatic church and thinks, “If I just go to a charismatic church, where they take a different approach to tongues/healing/prayer/worship—that will close the gap.”

Someone else grows up in charismatic church and thinks, “Things here are so experience-oriented and shallow; if I just go to a church that’s got some deep theology....” And so they go to real “heady” church.

Some people choose to go to a church that takes some particular approach to teaching or evangelism or the sacraments or social action—and they think, “If I just went to another kind of church—that would close the gap.”

Sometimes it’s like watching a giant game of musical pews.

And some people don’t try to close the gap any longer—*they just give up*.

They’ve tried all the supposed solutions and feel completely discouraged. Or hopeless.

So inwardly they decide such a different way of life is really not possible. They stay a Christian. They keep going to church. They maintain their involvement in church life. They sure

hope they're going to heaven when they die. But they decide that not much can be done about that gap in this life. So secretly, they give up.

Some of you have.

[PAUSE]

But what if there is another way?

What if Jesus was right?

What if it is possible for you to come increasingly alive with love, joy, peace—and it's not by trying harder?

What if the Spirit of God is like a river, flowing all the time in your life?

What if your job isn't to try harder or run faster or get up earlier?

What if God is at work all the time, in every place that you are?

What if your job is simply to jump in the river?

Your job is to figure out, from one moment to the next, "How do I just stay in the flow? How do I not do those things that close me off to the Spirit? How do I keep myself aware and submitted—so that those rivers of living water are running through my belly? How do I learn to flow with the Spirit?"

Let's take a look at John 16:12–15 where Jesus teaches about some of the roles the Holy Spirit has in our lives:

"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you."

The Spirit is a funnel through whom the blessings of God come to us. The Christian life is life lived in the Spirit.

In the passage I read earlier from John 16:7, the word Jesus used for “counselor,” referring to the Holy Spirit, in the original language is *parakletos*. This is an extremely rich word.

It comes from two different Greek words: *kaleo*—which means “to call” and *para*—which means “alongside.” The picture is of someone called to come alongside another person and stand by them.

It could be translated “comforter,” “helper,” or “advocate.” It was a word which was used in that day in the legal arena. The *parakletos* was one who would serve the defendant, acting as a character witness or a kind of legal counsel.

This word is used only one other time in the New Testament. It’s found in a shorter letter of John called 1 John, where he writes:

“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the father in our defense [parakletos]—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:1–2)

With the Spirit as our counselor we do not have to live in fear about judgment of God, for Jesus stands next to us, in effect saying: “On the basis of the cross, this one is mine. They are innocent. This one belongs to me.”

Turn to John 14:16–18 and let’s look at it together. Jesus is talking with his disciples and he says:

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”

He says he’ll send “another parakletos”! *Who* is the *first* one? It’s Jesus. And he tells his friends that he won’t leave them as orphans. They won’t be alone and on their own. In fact, he gives them this amazing promise about the Spirit:

“For he lives with you and will be in you.”

Jesus is saying that the Holy Spirit of almighty God is inside you. He takes up residence in your life!

Think about your need for a good counselor. Have you ever made a dumb decision? Do you ever worry about things even though worrying didn’t do you any good? What about people problems?

I once saw a cartoon of a woman with frazzled hair. She wore a haggard expression and had dark circles under her eyes. Her face was lined with care and she was saying: “When I woke up this morning I had one nerve left and now you’re getting *on it!*”

Does anybody here have people problems? Do some of you have a problem managing anger? Do some of you beat yourselves up all the time for things that aren’t your fault?

Jesus says he will send what Lloyd Ogilvie calls “the Greatest Counselor in the world.”

I believe there is a deeper adventure of the Spirit open to us. I’m jealous of that for you and me.

Let me ask you, if you had the ideal counselor—whether a professional counselor or a trusted friend—wouldn’t it be a wonderful thing?

For example, you would know that you are accepted. With the perfect counselor, you could say anything and they would always listen. They'd never turn away or reject you or laugh at you. As you spent time with that counselor, healing and change would begin to take place.

Time spent with the perfect counselor would yield perfect wisdom in your life. Your ideal counselor could diagnose you with great accuracy. You would find yourself filled with insight and clarity, guided toward truth and able to make decisions which yield far less negative consequences and have exponential benefits.

With the ideal counselor, you wouldn't be stuck with the status quo ... but empowered for change and better living.

It would be nice if you didn't have to pay for your counselor's time. Better yet, it would be nice if your counselor could just go with you wherever you are.

All of this is what the Holy Spirit does.

I have said to the Spirit,

“I want to be your counselee.

I want to have deep, private sessions with you.

I'm tired of trying to solve my problems myself.

I'm tired of carrying life-draining anxieties.

I want to ruthlessly follow your counsel.

I want you to be *my* counselor.”

The greatest counselor in the world helps us grow. And some of the ways that people grow in the knowledge of God and insight into the Bible is through the work of the Spirit within them. That's why, when someone becomes a Christ-follower, the truths in the Bible become more clear to them—there's a partnership taking place because of the Holy Spirit's presence.

Listen to what the apostle John writes about this in 1 John 2:20 and 27:

“But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. ... As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you.”

Does this mean we don't need pastors or sermons anymore? (I know some of you are getting excited.) Does this mean we can just stop paying their salaries? (More of you are getting excited.)

The answer to both questions is no! You see, there were people in the church who were teaching false doctrine—they were creating dissension and fear. These false teachers claimed that they had special authority based on a superior anointing of the Spirit.

John is encouraging the Christians to whom he was writing (and us today) by basically saying: “You *all* have the Spirit. Don't just be like sheep. Don't let someone intimidate you by claiming superior spirituality. You as much as anybody are in direct contact with Spirit of God.”

Another role that the Holy Spirit plays in our lives is that of guiding us.

When Jesus was teaching he referred to the coming of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit's role of guidance by saying:

“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.”

To illustrate, let me tell you about a young man named Scott. Scott had asked Christ into his life when he was young, but through the years he just drifted away from God and desired to simply control his own destiny—call the shots—live his life however he wanted regardless of the consequences.

By the time he was in his mid-thirties everything he held onto for security was slipping through his fingers. As a result of back surgery he could no longer work. His closest friend had died. He was losing his home ... if there was a bottom to be hit in his life he was there and excavating to go deeper.

Full of despair, Scott was driving around town asking God to show him what to do. He saw a road sign that said “Dead End” and that was how he felt. For some reason, he decided to see what was at the end of the road. When he reached it, he found a church.

It wasn't Sunday, but Scott pulled into the parking lot to cry and pray. He had tried other churches through the years and never felt accepted. But because of his prayer for guidance he decided to give this one a try the next Sunday.

He showed up and continued to come, week after week, and found the healing and hope through Jesus and that community of Christians which he had longed for all his life.

The Holy Spirit can even guide drivers to their destination. You may have a GPS in your car or use Mapquest—but they fall way short of the directing work of the Spirit of God!

What was prompting Scott to turn down that road? The Holy Spirit.

The Spirit gives us insight into truth. The Spirit gives us guidance. The Spirit also gives us wisdom. Listen to this promise from the Bible found in the book of James:

“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” (James 1:5)

God gives wisdom that we need through the Spirit.

Usually we'll approach someone and say, "I have a problem." Then we proceed to lay it out in great detail and finish by saying, with great emotion: "I need your wisdom on this. Please give it."

The Bible is quite clear that it is good to seek counsel from wise people around us. But wouldn't it make sense to first go to the Greatest Counselor?

Here's what we should do.

This week when you face a situation that needs wisdom, insight, and guidance, whether it's a:

- Significant decision
- A tough parenting situation
- A relational challenge
- A dilemma at work
- A need for time management

First, stop. Be still—even at work, just take a moment to quiet your heart.

Ask the Holy Spirit to give you wisdom and insight.

And listen.

The Spirit will bring Scripture to mind. You will have insights—sometimes a nudge to make the right choices. He'll guide! But you must listen.

When we partner with the Spirit through the course of each day, a greater dependence on him builds within us. We become sensitized to his presence. It is as though he is flowing through us with the freshness of a mountain river.

No longer will we be seeking to close the gap by trying harder, or pretending, or switching, or even giving up. But we will discover that from within rivers of living water are flowing from our belly ... and the fullness of life that Jesus promised will be ours because God is closer than we think.

*SOURCE: *Untapped Spiritual Resources*, by Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, IL. Citation: Bill Bright, "How to Be Filled with the Spirit" (Campus Crusade publication)