

Power, Power . . . We've Got the Power!

from *Flying Closer to the Flame* by Chuck Swindoll

Any book on the Holy Spirit must give some space to the subject of power, since our Lord promised His disciples this one thing when the Spirit came upon them. Remember His words?

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witness both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” – Acts 1:8

To those men, in that era, that heaven-sent, undeniable power from the One whom Jesus dispatched following His ascension manifested itself in dozens of different ways, many of them visible and supernatural. They were empowered to stand and preach before the public, unashamed and unafraid. They experienced such dynamic internal changes that they had the ability to speak in languages and dialects unknown to them. Some of them performed miraculous feats, others healed diseases instantly and permanently, discerned error, confronted evil, raised the dead, and endured the most torturous of deaths without flinching.

Something transformed those timid, awkward, fearful disciples into bold, devoted, inspiring men of God . . . and that something was *power*.

To be sure, that transitional interlude as the infant church was born and began to grow was a unique time. A time when miracles authenticated God's presence in human lives and God's message through human lips. Without the completed Scriptures, how would people know who were the anointed of God? Furthermore, in spreading the gospel rapidly across vast unevangelized regions, the ability to speak in many tongues was invaluable. Clearly, it took enormous power to launch the good ship *Ecclesia*.

But what about the power of the Spirit today? Can we—should we—expect “a miracle a day”? Should “supernatural power” be the watchword of every believer, whereby every one of us can expect “signs and wonders” on a regular basis? Is something wrong with us if we don't consistently witness or experience the Spirit of God's phenomenal presence and mighty workings? What are the evidences of Spirit-filled power today?

Let me set the record straight right away. In spite of what is being communicated these days, God's Word does not toss around the word *power* loosely; nor are we personally promised supernatural manifestations on a day-to-day basis. (As a friend of mine once said, “If miracles occurred every day, they wouldn't be called ‘miracles’ . . . they'd be called ‘regulars.’”) I have examined the Scriptures carefully and thoroughly for years, and nowhere do I find phenomenal demonstrations occurring on a daily basis in the lives of believers in biblical times. Neither then nor now could people expect to “name it and claim it.” It is not only frustrating to people, it is erroneous to hold out such unrealistic expectations of incredible “power.”

Today, however, power is in. There is “power evangelism” . . . “power prayer” . . . “power preaching” . . . “power healing” . . . “power encounters” and “power ministry” of every shape and size . . . even “power ties” available in various colors that “power ministers” can wear on “power Sundays.” Talk about an overused, abused word! And the not-so-subtle message all this leaves is obvious: “If I'm not operating within the ‘power’ realm, something is missing from my life. I need to plug into this incredible ‘power’ source, so I, too, can tell amazing stories of mind-boggling miracles.”

While I am just as interested in being a Spirit-filled minister of the gospel as anyone in God's family, I would caution all the Lord's people against such unrealistic and

unbiblical expectations. Power is promised us, yes, and in the person of the Holy Spirit we do have the source of that power within us—all of us do! But in no way does this mean that with the snap of our fingers we can expect to invoke some supernatural manifestation. It does not work like that it never did!

Understanding First Things First

Let's return to basics . . . two foundational issues we touched on earlier. One has to do with salvation, the other with being Spirit-filled.

How would you complete these two sentences?

- I am a Christian because _____.
- I am filled with the Spirit when _____.

What does it mean to be a Christian? How can a person say with assurance that he or she is a member of God's forever family? Let's allow God's Word to answer that for us.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name. – John 1:12

A little later, John's Gospel records Jesus' conversation with a man who had questions about how he could have eternal life with God.

Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God . . . That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so it is everyone who is born of the Spirit." – John 3:3, 6-8

"He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." – John 3:36

Is it that narrow? Is becoming a Christian limited solely to knowing Christ? Again, let's let Jesus answer that for us.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me." – John 14:6

That is an exclusive statement, no question about it. But the truth is as narrow as Christ has declared it, and it is truth because He said it. The first sentence I asked you to complete could read as follows: I am a Christian because *I am rightly related to the Son of God*. Later in the New Testament we read similar words as those we just looked at in the Gospel by John.

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. – 1 Timothy 2:5

And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. – 1 John 5:11-12

Very simple. Very clear. People are not born right with God. That is why everyone who hopes to spend eternity with Him must be born from above, born anew spiritually. Furthermore, people do not become Christians because they go to church or because they have been christened as babies or because they have been dedicated as children or because they have been baptized or because they are sincere and mean well and pay their bills. Becoming a Christian has nothing to do with what we do or with how hard we work. No, it's a matter of grace, not works.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. – Ephesians 2:8-9

Let me illustrate. I have a book in my hand. If I were to hand it to you and say, "It's yours; I'd like you to have it," and you were to take it, I would be giving you a gift. When you take the gift, you become the possessor of what was once mine. Because you took it, it's yours.

Likewise, salvation is a gift. God reached out to you and me at the cross, where His Son paid the penalty of sin by dying in our place, and He gave us eternal life in His Son. All He asks is that we reach out in faith and take His gift.

And so . . . how does one become a Christian? By being rightly related to Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is Salvation 101. It's as basic as you can get.

What must I do then to get the source of God's power into my life? This may surprise you, but the answer is *nothing*. He comes to live within you when you believe in Christ. You don't make a single contribution to your standing before God by doing this or promising that or giving up certain things. The transaction is based on grace—God's matchless, unmerited favor. When you and I receive the gift of eternal life, wrapped inside that gift is the Holy Spirit. He comes as part of the "initial salvation package." We are never commanded to pray for the Holy Spirit or to be baptized by the Holy Spirit or to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit or to be sealed by the Holy Spirit. Why? Because all of those things occur at the moment we are born anew.

So you have in your hands the book I gave you as a gift. Now, what if you were to say to me, "I would really, really love to have every chapter of this book." I would answer, "You have all the chapters. They are all there and they are all yours to read and enjoy. You have the book; therefore you have everything in it." So it is with Christ. Upon receiving Him, we have everything that comes with the gift of salvation . . . and that certainly includes the person of the Holy Spirit.

For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

– 1 Corinthians 12:12-13

And because we have the Spirit, the source of power is within us.

This brings me to the second sentence I asked you to complete, which could read: I am filled with the Spirit when *I am rightly related to the Spirit of God.*

When we are, the “power” within us is unleashed and we become His vessels of honor, ready and available for whatever service He wishes us to perform. When filled, the “power” that raised Christ from the dead becomes the motivating force behind our lives. Think of it! It was this very power Paul referred to when he wrote of his deep desire to fly closer to the flame:

[For my determined purpose is] that I may know Him—that I may progressively become more deeply and intimately acquainted with Him, perceiving and recognizing and understanding [the wonders of His Person] more strongly and more clearly. And that I may in that same way come to know the power outflowing from His resurrection [which it exerts over believers]; and that I may so share His sufferings as to be continually transformed [in spirit into His likeness even] to His death.

– Philippians 3:10 AMP

The filling of the Spirit not only means that our lives are totally available to God, but it also includes such things as keeping short accounts, being sensitive to whatever may have come between us and Him . . . and walking in complete dependence upon Him.

When we do, He is able to work through us, speak through us, use us, direct us without restraint, and empower our gifts and our efforts in ways we could never accomplish on our own. It isn’t that we need more of the Spirit (an impossibility); it is that we need His power, His working, His cleansing, His freeing. And as He fills us, all that and so much more take place.

To return to the P word: The Christian life is not some kind of ecstatic “power life” with hour-by-hour, day-after-day phenomenal experiences. The blessed Spirit of God does not provide “power surges” of incredible proportions.

Am I saying He never causes phenomenal, even miraculous things to occur? No. But what I am saying is that when He does, it is the exception rather than the rule. Our Lord is not in competition with Fantasyland.

My concern is that we have as realistic and relevant a view of this as the Scriptures allow—and nothing more. But make no mistake about it, when it comes to power, power . . . we’ve got the power!

Understanding the Continual, Normal Evidences of the Spirit’s Empowering

So, then, you may ask, “What is this realistic and relevant view of the Christian life? What can I expect to see as continual and normal evidences of Christ in my life?” Numerous things come to mind.

Because I am a Christian and therefore rightly related to the Son of God:

- I am in Christ.
- I live in Him and He lives in me.
- I know the relief of being cleansed from personal sins.
- I am able to live above sin’s dominating control.
- I have immediate access to the Father through prayer.
- I can understand the Scriptures.

- I am able to forgive—and should forgive—whoever wrongs me.
- I have the capacity to bear fruit, daily, continually, routinely.
- I possess at least one (sometimes more than one) spiritual gift.
- I worship with joy and with purpose.
- I find the church vital, not routine or boring.
- I have a faith to share with others.
- I love and need other people.
- I look forward to having close fellowship with other Christians.
- I am able to obey the teaching of the Word of God.
- I continue to learn and grow toward maturity.
- I can endure suffering and hardship without losing heart.
- I depend and trust in my Lord for daily strength and provisions.
- I can know God’s will.
- I live in anticipation of Christ’s return.
- I have the assurance of heaven after I die.

This list could continue for pages, but perhaps this sampling will alert you to the fact that these are the kinds of unique possessions, experiences, and blessings that are ours by God’s grace to enjoy simply because we have been accepted into His family. They are ours to claim every day. And when we add them all together, they represent an impressive list of incredible realities.

While none of the above would be considered miraculous—at least in the usual sense of the term—they are certainly remarkable. And when we remind ourselves that these are normal and continually ours to enjoy, the Christian life becomes the most enviable lifestyle one can imagine.

This may not be “power Christianity,” but it is certainly the “abundant life” Christ promised. Get that straight . . . or you will live your life disappointed and frustrated, always looking for something more ecstatic or supernatural in nature.

Several years ago a pilot told me that flying an airplane consists of hours and hours of sheer boredom, interrupted periodically with split seconds of sheer panic.

I would never use the word *boredom* to describe the Christian life, but you get the point. God can (and sometimes does) step into our world in supernatural ways and manifest His power. It is remarkable how on occasion He interrupts the routine (if we could call the things I listed routine) with something phenomenal that only He could have done. We acknowledge that and praise Him for it . . . but, I repeat, we should not expect that day after day.

In some ways, the normal Christian life is not unlike the normal married life. The normal married life is not soft music, Saran-Wrap negligees, and night-after-night in a bubbly hot tub. The normal married life is not soft-footed waiters serving you tea in the afternoon at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel while you watch the surf break on Maui. It’s not letters in the mail several times a month announcing that you and your mate have won \$50 million in the lottery jackpot. It’s not a husband coming home with flowers every afternoon. It’s not \$500 gift certificates to Nordstroms each Saturday morning. It’s not happy, carefree teenagers anxious to help with the dishes and thrilled to keep their

rooms clean. It's not a mother-in-law with a face like Michelle Pfeiffer and a heart like Mother Teresa.

If you are a bride or groom-to-be anticipating that, I've got only three words for you. *Get a life!* Visit with any married couple for a day or two (especially those with small children), and you will come back to reality real fast.

In the same way, some Fantasyland concept of Christianity frustrates much more than it thrills. The wide-eyed, smiling televangelist won't tell you this, but I'm giving you the straight scoop.

So much for a quick summary of the Christian life. Now how about the Spirit-filled life? Let me suggest another list for you to ponder. These are things you and I can claim when the Spirit is in full control.

When we are Spirit-filled and therefore rightly related to the Spirit of God:

- We are surrounded by the Spirit's omnipotent shield of protection, continually and routinely.
- We have an inner dynamic to handle life's pressures.
- We are able to be joyful. . . regardless.
- We have the capacity to grasp the deep things of God that He discloses to us in His Book.
- We have little difficulty maintaining a positive attitude of unselfishness, servanthood, and humility.
- We have a keen sense of intuition and discernment; we sense evil.
- We are able to love and be loved in return.
- We can be vulnerable and open.
- We can rely on the Spirit to intercede for us when we don't even know how to pray as we should.
- We need never fear evil or demonic and satanic assault.
- We are enabled to stand alone with confidence.
- We experience inner assurance regarding decisions as well as right and wrong.
- We have an "internal filtering system."
- We can actually live worry-free.
- We are able to minister to others through our spiritual gift(s).
- We have an intimate, abiding "Abba relationship" with the living God.

When I buried my dad, who outlived my mother by nine years, for the first time I found myself feeling alone, even though I was an adult and a father of four. While feeling strangely and suddenly "orphaned," the thought dawned on me that I have the Spirit of God to be my constant companion and counselor for the rest of my life. How wonderful! He lives as a permanent resident. His earthly address is my body!

Again, none of the things on the list above could be called phenomenal . . . they are neither miraculous in nature nor supernatural manifestations . . . but they are ours to claim simply because the powerful Spirit of God is filling us. This is not "power filling," but the normal, albeit wonderful, Spirit-filled life.

And frankly, these evidences are the kinds of things we need and can count on far more than those exceptional moments of sheer ecstasy. These are the things we can count on because we are rightly related to the Son of God and to the Spirit of God. We do not need continual, highly charged “power visions” or “power encounters” nearly as much as we need to be filled with the sustaining, all-powerful Spirit of God.

I say again, power, power . . . we’ve got the power! Who does? Every child of God who walks in the power of the Holy Spirit. When we do, we are “freed up” to enjoy incredible release from the things that would otherwise hold us in bondage. What great liberty!

Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.
– 2 Corinthians 3:17

Just look at that promise.

Liberty is another word for freedom. Freedom from what? Freedom from constraint and from fear. Freedom from tedious perfectionism. Freedom from a confining, boring, predictable life. Freedom from bondage. Freedom from addictions. Freedom to be, to do, to become. And such freedom comes from simply having the Spirit and allowing Him to fill us. Again, it is not “power freedom.” It is quiet, gentle release from all that binds us so that we can be whole, completely authentic. When in grief, we are free to cry. When experiencing joy, we are free to laugh.

Admitting Occasional Exceptional Experiences

Am I saying that we never experience the miraculous? I am not. Or that we should consider all supernatural manifestations today as coming from the devil? No. I am suggesting, however, that we be discerning. He is God. He can do anything, anytime, anywhere. That is His prerogative.

Many times people come to me and say, “Would you pray for so-and-so?” and they will name a wife, a husband, a mother, a dad, a child, or a friend who’s dying. Doctors have given up hope and encouraged them not to expect anything but death. So they ask, “Would you just pray for that person?” My answer invariably is, “Yes, of course.” And I do. But beyond that I really have no right to promise those people that their loved ones will be healed and live. Not being God and not knowing God’s specific will, I pray for God’s glory to be manifested. I pray that if it is His will He might bring about a miraculous healing. And I pray that He will give strength to those who wait and minister to the dying. But I have no right to make a “power promise.” *Neither does anyone else!*

Let me remind you that when we talk about the Spirit of God, we are not talking about a small part of the whole. The Spirit of God is, in fact, God. And as a member of the Godhead, He is incomprehensible and infinite in nature. His work can seem mysterious and at times His presence, terribly obscure. Humanly speaking, I sometimes feel His plan is a bit confusing and illogical. (But that’s my problem, not His). Because I cannot unravel His divine tapestry or explain in detail the work of His hands, it does not mean that there is something wrong with His plan.

Zophar the Naamathite said to Job in utter despair, “Can we by searching find out God?” The implication is no.

And since this is true, let’s let God be God. Let’s not feel that we must explain every part of Him or defend His plan or describe His will to the nth degree. We would do well to employ three words on a regular basis: “I don’t know.”

With these things in mind, I conclude this chapter with three final thoughts:

First, *God is the God of the miraculous*. Please do not misquote or misrepresent me by saying that Swindoll does not believe in the miraculous. God is God; therefore,

miracles fall from His hands. They do occur. But let's be true to the Scriptures and correctly state that those miracles are the exceptions, not the norm. They aren't "regulars." Nor do they occur on command. They occur when God, in His marvelous, mysterious, inscrutable plan, causes them to happen.

Second, *God is the God of the supernatural*. Again, Scripture suggests that supernatural phenomena are occasional, not routine. But be careful what you tag "miraculous" or "phenomenal." Don't toss those words around loosely. It's like the word "awesome." Everything today is awesome. Ballplayers are awesome! Toyotas are awesome! Nonsense. Only God is awesome. And if He is pleased to carry out some phenomenal manifestation, I stand back and applaud it and would not even attempt to explain it . . . and certainly not act as though I caused it.

Third, *God is the God of the mysterious*. Because He is God, He can—and does—cause things to occur that we cannot explain. However, I remind you again, such mysteries are occasional and exceptional. To quote A. W. Tozer:

Left to ourselves we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms. We want to get Him where we can use Him, or at least know where He is when we need Him. We want a God we can in some measure control. We need the feeling of security that comes from knowing what God is like, and what He is like is of course a composite of all the religious pictures we have seen, all the best people we have known or heard about, and all the sublime ideas we have entertained.

If all this sounds strange to modern ears, it is only because we have for a full half century taken God for granted. The glory of God has not been revealed to this generation of men. The God of contemporary Christianity is only slightly superior to the gods of Greece and Rome, if indeed He is not actually inferior to them, in that He is weak and helpless while they at least had power.

If what we conceive God to be He is not, how then shall we think of Him? If He is indeed incomprehensible, as the Creed declares Him to be, and unapproachable, as Paul says He is, how can we Christians satisfy our longing after Him? The hopeful words, "Acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace," still stand after the passing of the centuries; but how shall we acquaint ourselves with One who eludes all the straining efforts of mind and heart? And how shall we be held accountable to know what cannot be known? . . .

The answer of the Bible is simply "through Jesus Christ our Lord." In Christ and by Christ, God effects complete self-disclosure, although He shows Himself not to reason but to faith and love. Faith is an organ of knowledge and love an organ of experience. God came to us in the incarnation; in atonement He reconciled us to Himself, and by faith and love we enter and lay hold on Him.

"Verily God is of infinite greatness," says Christ's enraptured troubadour, Richard Rolle; "more than we can think; . . . unknowable by created things; and can never be comprehended by us as He is in Himself. But even here and now, whenever the heart begins to burn with a desire for God, she is made able to receive the uncreated light and, inspired and fulfilled by the gifts of the Holy Ghost, she tastes the joys of heaven."¹

I have a very good friend whose son has been through an incredibly difficult period of illness. I have ached with him and his wife, and Cynthia and I have prayed for them frequently in the last few months. For a while nothing was going right. Things that were bad only got worse. They faced a wall of impossibilities they could not scale. And then—

a breakthrough occurred. They were put in touch with a specialist, a gifted, insightful physician who, through a particular technique, introduced them to the source of the problem. And this little fellow who had been laid aside for months is now well on his way to full recovery, for which we praise our sovereign God and His empowering Spirit.

It would be the tendency of some to cry, “Miraculous!” No, it was no miracle. It was, in fact, a delicate, scientific, carefully honed procedure of diagnosis and treatment that worked on the boy. Was God in it? Absolutely. Doctors diagnose and treat; God alone can heal. God, in powerful grace, led in the finding of the physician. God prompted another person to provide all the finances since the couple had meager resources. And God used the procedure to heal the boy’s life.

His power was evident from start to finish . . . but it was no “power healing.” What happened? Several of us joined our hearts with our friends and decided to fly closer to the flame as together we trusted Him who has all the power to do whatever is best. It happened quietly, slowly, thoroughly . . . and powerfully.

Notes:

¹A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 16-17.