

Searched By the Spirit

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Scripture

1 Corinthians 2:1-13

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the testimony of God to you with superior speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were made not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are being destroyed. But we speak God's wisdom, a hidden mystery, which God decreed before the ages for our glory and which none of the rulers of this age understood, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him"—

God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

Sermon

In 1916, scores of people from all over the country arrived on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey to attend the Victorious Life Conference. At this charismatic event, people came looking for relief from illness, anxiety, and worry. They came from a world caught in the strife and suffering of the First World War, looking for a victorious life. They came to witness the work of the Holy Spirit. "I had a nervous breakdown," one participant recounts, "and the devil got hold of me; but since coming here I have surrendered my whole life, and [now] I have the peace that passes understanding...I [haven't] worried since." [1]

I can assure you that wasn't the Princeton Seminary I experienced over thirty years ago. We rarely talked about the Holy Spirit, the orphan of the Holy Trinity.

Some of our Christian siblings, charismatics or Pentecostals, have no problem being open to the Spirit. Their worship is animated; ours tend to be staid and proper. "Decent and order." They praise and sing and move and dance. Although, since we started singing the new doxology *Glory to God, Whose Goodness Shines of Me* in worship, I can look out and see people moving and swaying and smiling and clapping as they sing! [2] Charismatics anticipate, expect

the Spirit to show up, to do something, to move them. Do we? There’s a reason why Presbyterians are known as God’s frozen chosen.

Of course, we say we believe in the Holy Spirit. We say so in our creeds. We say her name on Pentecost, and we wear red. But, honestly, what about us? Where is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives? If we think that the Spirit’s primary expression involves a lot of jumpin’ and shoutin’ and carryin’ on, we’ll miss where the Spirit is really moving among and within us.

So, where is the Spirit moving? How do we know? It’s not easy. It’s a matter of knowing where to look, and it’s often not where we expect. It’s easy to find God in good times. In challenging or bad times, it’s easy to feel that God has deserted us or is punishing us. Does God really love me? If so, then why is my life falling apart?

Many years ago, when I was at Princeton Seminary, I discovered a truth that changed my life and continues to inform how I live and seek to serve. That truth—I venture to say—is that God’s Spirit can be found most profoundly in the midst of pain and suffering and sorrow. I came to see that even though life might be painful and confusing, even though it feels like everything is unraveling all around us and our lives are falling apart, even when we think we’re going crazy and losing our minds because life is so difficult to bear, these experiences *might* also be powerful indications that something else might be going on within us. Perhaps we are being searched by the Spirit, who refuses to let us remain in the pain, confusion, suffering, and sorrow of our lives.

Now, please hear me, please understand: I’m *not* saying that the Spirit causes the pain and sorrow. What I’m saying is that we need to pay attention to these moments, because we might find them the Spirit searching us, that is, trying to bring something to consciousness, something we refuse or cannot see or feel, but need to. What I’m talking about is the experience of being caught in a *tension*—*pay attention to the tension*—the tension between what we are and what we hope to be, between the we know it now and life as we know it should be, that space in-between, when we sense that we want to grow or change our lives. I’m primarily talking about our personal lives; but the same can be true for the church or wider communities. When we sense this tension or conflict within us, *that* tension, I suggest, just might be proof the Spirit of Christ is working within us.

Could it be that instead of thinking ourselves abandoned by God in periods of conflict and crisis, we can discover God in the tension, searching us with the liberating Spirit of God, bringing us through it all to new life? “The Lord is Spirit,” Paul tells us, “and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17). The Spirit intends to make you free, and sometimes freedom doesn’t come easy. While the Holy Spirit is often described as a comforter (John 16:7), life in the Spirit is not always about being comfortable. Life in the Spirit is not a band-aid approach to life, covering up deep wounds of the human spirit. Instead, the Spirit, in love, rooted in grace—*always* rooted in love and grace—wants to expose the wound that needs healing. And that’s not always easy or welcomed.

When I was a boy running down our gravel driveway, I often tripped and fell. I remember running into the house crying with my knees bruised and bloodied. After my mother cleaned me up, I always wanted her to put a band-aid on the cuts. Every time she said, “Leave it open so the air can get to it and heal it.” That always stayed with me.

The air. The wind. The mark of the Spirit at Pentecost was the blowing of a violent powerful, purifying, flaming wind (Acts 2:2). Sometimes the Spirit’s wind is a breeze, blowing gently, but it can also be a gale uprooting everything in its path, a breath stirring...a fire

warming, fire burning. Sometimes being searched by the liberating Spirit of God feels like having the band-aid ripped off, the wound lay bare, exposed to the healing wind of the Spirit.

For millennia, the Church has prayed, “Come, Holy Spirit.” The Church has prayed, *Veni, Creator Spiritus*. Come, Creator Spirit! But do we realize what we’re asking for when we pray this way? It’s a pray to be made with fear and trembling. When we ask for the Holy Spirit to come, we are asking for the Spirit who searches the inner, most intimate depths of God’s Being (1 Cor 2:10)—which includes the suffering of the cross—to reveal to our human spirits the deepest mysteries and hidden wisdom of God. If the Spirit’s intention is to liberate us, to bring us life, to embody resurrection, to help us share in the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16), and if we really want to be free and come to life (which isn’t always the case), then we need to be open to what such a liberation might look like. It might mean going to hell and back.

When God searches us, we will always get more than we expect. There’s no way to know the outcome. We can only give ourselves over to her liberating work, trusting that it will all bring us deeper into the love of God. How many times, when after going through the strife of the present, blind to God’s presence in the moment, do we look back and see that the Spirit was indeed at work in our lives during the periods of greatest chaos? It shouldn’t surprise us that the Spirit can be known in chaos because the Spirit who searches us has also searched the depths of God, who disclosed the depth of God’s love through Christ in the chaos of the cross.

God plumbs to the core of our being, our heart of hearts, and one by one lays bare the things that distort our lives and disfigure God’s image within, everything within us that needs to be acknowledged and accepted and *loved* and healed: the hurt inflicted upon us in our youth, the pain from parents who were unable to give us the love and attention we needed, all those nagging regrets, missed opportunities, wrong decisions, the wrongs we have done to others, the wrongs that were done to us that we can’t seem to forgive, the anger we have toward ourselves or God or someone who hurt us deeply, all the lies we’re skilled at hiding behind, afraid to accept ourselves or accept others, afraid to love the stranger because he or she reminds us what we cannot accept within ourselves, all that dwells in the darkest recesses of the soul, all our phobias. All this—and more—are the barriers that obstruct our relationships with God, our neighbor, and ourselves; they hinder us from true life, life-giving life.

What I have found when we struggle with these deeply personal issues, remain and sit in the tension, sense the way God is bringing them to awareness, inviting us, even forcing us to face the things that prevent us from moving into new life, we can be assured that the Spirit is searching us. This is how we grow and develop as people of faith. The Spirit is searching and calling and inviting us to be open to God’s healing, the work of wholeness, which is what resurrection is all about; a God who wants to show us “things beyond our hearing, things beyond our imagining,” given by God, things so wonderful, so good, so beautiful, given in love. For, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined the things that God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

I first preached on this text more than thirty years ago in the Princeton Seminary chapel, and I’ve preached different versions of that same sermon for over thirty years—the last time here twenty-one years ago. When I look back, I see how these verses, together, have been a thread woven through my life, my personal life, my ministry, my academic pursuits and scholarship, my current studies in theology and psychology, and thirty-plus years of therapy; it all links back to what I have come to know of the searching Spirit of God. This truth is at the core of my being, but it’s not easy to convey, yet I continue to try.

To be searched by the Spirit means to witness the work of a God making all things new! God will go to extraordinary lengths, all the way to the cross and back, to hell and back, in *love*, *always in love*, searching the deepest parts of our spirits to reveal, to expose our sin and brokenness, to help us to face our wounds, to lead us toward *new* life. This is what it means to be searched by the Spirit. God breaks in and reveals the chaos of our lives, and then opens us up to the fresh breath of the Spirit so that we can be healed, a Spirit who disrupts and disturbs, a Spirit who turns our world upside and inside out, who shakes the foundations of our lives in fear and trembling until we wake up—*wake up!*— and see God’s love at work in our heart of hearts, in everyone and everything.

Come, Holy Spirit! Come! *Veni, Creator Spiritus!*



Sources

- [1] Cited in George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022). The Keswick Victorious Life Conferences took place on the Princeton campus several times between 1916 and 1918.
- [2] Written by Paul M. Vasile. From *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).