

# Secrets of Christian Spiritual Power

---

**Scripture: Luke 3:21-23; 4:1-15**

**Key Thought: Studying how Jesus came through his temptations full of God's Spirit helps us to learn to be filled with God's strength.**

## **Intro Idea: How do we know when spiritual power is at work?**

We can tell that spiritual power is evident when what is happening can't quite be explained by the bare facts of the moment alone. I remember as a young minister attending a Billy Graham Crusade in a stadium in Baltimore Maryland. I was particularly interested in learning from the way that Billy Graham gave invitations at the end of the message. I thought I would learn some new technique or word formula that would make my own service endings more successful. (If you see a red flag in my motivations, you are right.) But on with the story. I was seated in one of the top decks eagerly watching and listening for that moment. It arrived, and frankly, I was not impressed at all. Graham said a few rather low-key words and then just bowed his head and waited. I said to myself, "I've given better invitations than that!" But before I could think for long, streams of people began descending from the stands into the field below. Now I knew many of them were counselors, but I also knew that many of them were not counselors, but they were ordinary people, hundreds of them, whose hearts were responding to God in that moment. Then I thought about the hundreds, perhaps of thousands of people who were undoubtedly praying for that series of meetings, and I understood that what I was seeing could only be explained as God's spiritual power at work. That day changed my ministry alright, but not in the way I anticipated. Rather, I begin to yearn for God's strength to work through me to accomplish his work.

You see, you and I need God's power at work through us as well; not in order to be recognized as spiritual; indeed, not for any other selfish reason. We need the Holy Spirit's power to successfully live a Christian life and to accomplish the mission Jesus gave us. The Bible says in Eph. 2:10 that there are "good works prepared in advance for us to do." But we do not get very far in our Christian lives before we discover that God's plans for us are challenging. For that matter, life itself is challenging. Navigating life with a Christ-like Spirit while at the same time making a kingdom difference requires spiritual power beyond ourselves. How do we get it?

In his Pentecost Sunday Sermon Peter assured us all with a special promise.

*"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call." Acts 2:38,39 NIV*

The Holy Spirit is God's empowering agent for our lives! And the promise of the Holy Spirit in that verse specifically includes you and me!

Now the act of being baptized itself does not save us. Peter taught in his first epistle that it is "not removal of dirt" – that is not the act itself, - but rather the "pledge of a good conscience before God" that is having a heart of repentance and faith. But when we do acknowledge our own need of repentance and put our faith in Jesus, then the Holy Spirit of God is given to us as well. That is a wonderful assurance for all of us. Every Christian has the Holy Spirit within. But there is more to learn.

When reading and studying Scripture, it is often good to look for what is surprising about the passage. Think about the incident we read about Jesus' time of testing in the wilderness. After the spiritual high time at his baptism, Jesus went into the desert "full of the Holy Spirit" according to Luke 4:1. Next, after what should have been a draining time of fasting and grave spiritual trial in the arid and inhospitable Judean wilderness, I would have expected Jesus to emerge physically and spiritually exhausted. But surprise! Jesus emerges from the wilderness still fully energized "in the power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14) as the Bible says and evidently primed for action considering all the ministry that begins immediately thereafter and is described for us in the later part of chapter 4. How did this energizing happen? In one sense we are tempted to answer, "He was Jesus, the second person of the Trinity; that's why he had such spiritual power." It is true, Jesus was divine—but, on the other hand, he was also fully human. And in his humanity, he received and maintained spiritual power in the same way that we must. So, we need to follow the example of Jesus if we are to grow in spiritual strength. Looking for some clues from Jesus will help us to be able to live in God's strength.

While the Bible mainly relates to us the conversations with the devil during the temptations of Jesus, we learn from them that Jesus answered every time with Scripture. So, we can conclude that in this time of testing Jesus' mind was on God's Word. His communion was with God. Comparing other Scriptures, we learn that during his ministry, Jesus made it a habit to go out alone to spend time with God. One day a week ago, the devotional book I am reading for evening devotions had a list of Scriptures in Luke where Jesus is recorded as praying. Of the fourteen instances listed, at least six of them speak of Jesus going apart alone to spend time in prayer. This was evidently one secret of Jesus' spiritual power -- he frequently spent

## **Time Alone with God**

We can find examples beginning in this same chapter. Luke 4:42 Jesus went to a solitary place at daybreak. There he received direction from his Father to move on to other towns. In Luke 5:16, we learn that he often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. In Luke 6:12, he withdrew to a mountainside and spent the night praying to God before designating the twelve apostles.

Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones put it this way,

*"The Kingdom way of life begins with receptivity." Abundant Living p. 335*

Spending time alone with God is an action that indicates our receptivity to God's Word and his will. It is one way that we maintain our spiritual strength. In Eph. 5:18 we read the admonition, "Be filled with Spirit," which when tenses are considered should really translated, "Be being filled with the Holy Spirit." We cannot fill ourselves with God's Spirit. But we are responsible to have an attitude of commitment and an open and seeking heart that prepares the way for God to work in our lives.

I always note that in Acts 4:31, the same people who had been baptized in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost were all filled with the Spirit again just a short time later. Why, because their hearts were seeking, prepared and receptive.

Friends one of the best things we can do for our spiritual lives is spend time alone with God. The time of day doesn't matter. Some people can do it while walking or even exercising. Others like me need to be quiet to focus well. Most of us need to schedule it into our day regularly or it won't happen.

### **So, the first secret of spiritual power that we learn from Jesus is time spent alone with God – in prayer and in the Word.**

The second thing that I note about the experience of Jesus is how victorious he was over his temptations. The devil's temptations were a test for Jesus, a testing which he endured without sin and with complete victory. The Bible tells us that the devil left him. This victory is a second secret of Jesus' spiritual power. May God help us to be

### **Victorious over Temptation!**

I have learned that the most deflating thing, the thing that can really bring me down is an act contrary to my conscience. One of the grave temptations that Christians face is to try and maintain their spirituality while hypocritically holding on to blatant hidden sins. It does not work. We cannot expect to experience great power and fruit from God if we are not allowing God to give us victory over the temptations that we face.

We may excuse ourselves with rationalizations such as "I couldn't help it" or "Everyone's doing it" but our moral failures remain. It is not God's fault if we fall for the devil's lines. Testing and temptation happen to everyone. They are part of the human experience.

But I have also learned that overcoming temptation leaves me spiritually stronger and more confident. Jesus had overcome the enemy completely and emerged from the wilderness empowered for ministry.

God has promised that we also can be victorious over our temptations. Paul wrote,

*No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. 1 Co 10:13 NIV*

In fact, the dominating victory of Jesus is part of our assurance that we can have victory over temptation too. The writer of Hebrews connects the two and assures us when he writes,

*Because he (that is Jesus) suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. Heb 2:18 NIV*

Unlike Jesus, our obedience is often imperfect. That is why one of the ways that we prepare for the sacrament of communion is to examine ourselves and allow God's Spirit to point out places where we need to ask forgiveness and turn back to the right path. Then God can cleanse our hearts and spirits, so we are rightly prepared to partake together. In that way our spiritual strength is regularly restored. Remember 1 John 1:9.

In addition, we can receive power to overcome not just in times of temptation but also in all kinds of difficult circumstances. With the help of Jesus who suffered on the cross and overcame death itself, we can persevere with faith in difficult physical, financial, emotional or relational circumstances too. In a time of physical trials, God spoke comfort to Paul.

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. 2 Co 12:9*

So, Paul could say with both grit and a personal experience of victory,

*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 2 Co 4:8-9 NIV*

## **The second secret of spiritual power is to be victorious over temptation and testing by the help of God.**

### **(Active in Ministry)**

The last clue to Jesus' spiritual power that we can gather from this passage is what he was doing when the Scripture says that he came into Galilee with power. After his temptations the record is filled with busy days of ministry. He taught regularly in the synagogues, (4:14,15, 16-21 and again in 4:31); he cast out demons 4:33-36, 40,41; and he healed many 4:39, 40,41.

*The point is this. The power of God's spirit was present and active in and through ministry.*

We will be frustrated if we do not understand that spiritual strength is not simply a feel-good thing, though Jesus certainly wants us to have a sense of well-being. God's power at work in us is purposeful. The Holy Spirit works through us to accomplish the mission of God. If we are not about God's business, the Holy Spirit does not need to give us a great deal of his power and energy because we will not use it properly.

Also, when we are about the work of God, it makes us conscious of our need for God's power. It makes us hungry to seek it because we need it in order for other lives to be transformed as God intended, through the use of our God-given gifts.

For example, anybody can compose and deliver a sermon, but there is a great difference in the effect of the words depending upon the anointing of the Holy Spirit upon the service, the pastor and the message. The same is true for Bible study leaders and teachers of children.

And preachers and teachers aren't the only people that God wants to work through by his Holy Spirit either. Did you ever have an opportunity to offer advice or counsel to a family member or friend who was going through a difficult situation? What a perfect time for God's spiritual power to be working through you however God desires.

In the Old Testament God anointed people with leadership and technical skill in order that the Temple would be built properly. Bezalel is specifically mentioned as having been giving divine skill as a craftsman and leader of craftsmen. In the New Testament gifts such as helping, encouraging, giving and leadership are specifically mentioned. And I think there are many others that are not mentioned. God wants to empower your gifts for kingdom effectiveness. He desires to strengthen your witness and use your daily influence mightily.

**So, the third secret of spiritual power that we learn from Jesus' example is to be active in God's work in the world, works of love and ministry, words of encouragement and mentoring that require divine strength to be effective.**

### **Conclusion:**

As a pastor, I could usually tell who the ministry leaders were who regularly spent time with God in private prayer and lived consistent Christian lives. I sometimes referred to them privately as "live wires." You know, electricians are always testing wires to see if they are live. The evidence is usually a little light on a tester. But as Christians, there is evidence when we have spent time with God too. Over time spiritual giftings become evident. The fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc. become a little more evident. And what I call spiritual initiative happens around such lives. One of the finest examples of this was an administrative assistant I had at my second church. She did not have an easy life. Two of her four children had been born severely handicapped. Yet she maintained her faith in God and her daily walk with God. One year she was also the VBS director. She felt led to emphasize teaching about baptism that year, something we had never done in VBS. But it became obvious that her idea was God-given as at the close of that VBS we held a baptismal service, and I baptized about 11 people. Friends, people who walk with God walk in power. They have an influence beyond what they know. That is God's intention for you and for me as we walk with Jesus. AMEN.

Prayers to go with this message

Call to Worship:

Almighty and gracious God, we are so privileged to gather here again this morning to worship you. We ascribe to you praise and honor and glory! We love your Son Jesus who made it possible that we who have no standing of our own can come into your holy presence with confidence in prayer and adoration. Please help us now to be open and attentive to the leading, guiding and teaching presence of your Holy Spirit in us and among us. We pray in Jesus' Holy Name, AMEN.

Prayer of Awareness:

Oh, merciful Father, we pray with the Psalmist that you would search our hearts and minds and reveal to us thoughts and habits that are not your ways. We would repent of them, asking your forgiveness and seeking your transforming grace that we might continue to be made new in the likeness of Jesus, in whose name we pray, AMEN.

Prayer of Dedication:

Oh God, what do we have that we did not receive? And how can we hold back when you have been so generous to us? Please accept the gifts of our hands and our lives as we dedicate them to you, in the name of Jesus, AMEN.