

## **“Four Days That Change Everything –**

### **Day 4: The Power of the Holy Spirit”**

Acts 1.6-8; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10; Romans 15.13

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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“You will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” So spoke Jesus to his disciples, not many weeks after his resurrection. He was looking ahead to what would happen on the Day of Pentecost, when tongues of fire gave them the ability to speak in other languages. That gift of the Holy Spirit enabled the gospel to be proclaimed to a multitude of people from many nations, three thousand of whom gave their lives to Jesus, were baptized, and joined the church, all on the same day.

Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that’s *all* that the Holy Spirit did. There was a big splash on the Day of Pentecost, which we remember and celebrate every year, and that’s that.

Not so. Not so, at all. For the book of Acts tells us that there were *many* other times, after Pentecost, when people received the Holy Spirit, or were full of the Holy Spirit, or did mighty deeds of power through the Holy Spirit. A bunch of Samaritans, for example, received the Holy Spirit when Peter and John prayed and laid their hands on them (Acts 8); a group of Gentiles received the Holy Spirit when Peter visited the house of a Roman centurion named Cornelius (Acts 10); Paul and Barnabas were set apart by the Holy Spirit for their missionary journeys (Acts 13) – the list goes on; there are too many instances to name here; the Holy Spirit is mentioned over 40 times in that book alone. A good exercise is to read through the Book of Acts and make note of every single time the Holy Spirit *does* something. It could be argued that the book shouldn’t be called “The Acts of the Apostles” but rather “The Acts That the Apostles Did Through the Power of the Holy Spirit.” For the Spirit keeps moving, acting, filling people with faith, equipping them for ministry, uniting them with the church of Jesus Christ.

And ... giving them *power*. We’re going to talk about that power today. Admittedly, this is a little hard to do. Nowhere in the New Testament is there an explanation of how the Holy Spirit works, or a list of the things that one can *do* through the power of the Holy Spirit. It’s simply assumed, like when Paul blesses the Christians in Rome, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13) He doesn’t explain this *power of the Holy Spirit*; he just assumes they know what he’s talking about.

But is an explanation necessary for us? Perhaps. Perhaps there’s someone out there who’s wondering, “Is the Holy Spirit something that *I* can receive? Is there a power that *I* could have access

to?” The answers are *yes* and *yes*. But what *is* the Holy Spirit? *Hmm*. How do I explain it?

Let’s take a little field trip to the Greek city of Thessaloniki. Thessaloniki is today the second-largest metropolitan area in Greece, with over a million inhabitants and a thriving economy; it is home to an international trade fair, an international film festival, numerous museums, art galleries, athletic stadiums, archaeological sites, and is a popular tourist destination. It was founded 23 centuries ago. In the first century it was an important trade center and the capital of one of the districts of Macedonia. The city was home to both Greeks and Jews; there was a synagogue here when the apostle Paul passed through, in about the year 50. He spent at least three weeks in Thessaloniki, talking with both Greeks and Jews, and persuading quite a number of them to become Christians. We know a few names: Jason, Aristarchus, Secundus; the names of the others are lost to history. A church was born, a church that would become very strong, healthy, and vibrant. Paul was chased out of town by some of the Jews, though he did come back to visit the Christians in Thessaloniki again, probably twice. And he wrote two letters to those Christians in Thessaloniki, letters which anybody can read today. Those letters give some clues to how the Holy Spirit *worked* in the lives of those people, when Paul came to town.

“Our good news didn’t come to you just in speech,” Paul says; “but also with *power* and the *Holy Spirit* and *deep conviction*.” (1 Thessalonians 1:5) We have to read between the lines here. Paul shows up in the city, and he starts talking with *complete strangers* about some guy named Jesus, and the things that he did, and the things that he said, and the things that happened to him, and how he came back from the dead – you know the stories. The people in Thessaloniki presumably knew nothing about any of that. But he’s not just relating factual information to them, a set of stories and teachings; he’s somehow persuading them that this guy *matters*, matters *immensely*, so much so that people need to change their lives to follow him, *now*. Paul says that the Thessalonians “accepted the message that came from the Holy Spirit.” (1 Thessalonians 1:6) It wasn’t *his* message; it was the *Holy Spirit’s* message. The Holy Spirit was speaking *through* Paul, and helped those people to both *listen* and *receive*. There was something *spiritual* going on, in people’s hearts and lives, as Paul spoke. They received the message, Paul says, “with joy in spite of great suffering.” What kind of suffering? Maybe they have friends and family members who were telling them not to listen to this crackpot. Maybe they were the object of ridicule, derision, persecution. But that didn’t matter: the *joy* was worth the *suffering*. Receiving Christ into your heart through the power of the Holy Spirit is worth *any* amount of suffering. They felt *compelled* to follow; they willingly chose to make radical changes to their lives. “You turned to God from idols,” Paul says (1 Thessalonians 1:9). They left their cultural and religious practices behind them. And who knows what else, that Paul doesn’t mention. We’re talking about a complete change of hearts and lives here. Paul says “you became imitators of us and of the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 1:6); “you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia” (1 Thessalonians 1:7); “the message about the Lord rang out from you”; “the news about your faithfulness to God has spread” (1 Thessalonians 1:8); “you are serving the living and true God.” (1 Thessalonians 1:9). *The Holy Spirit was mightily at work*. We have to speculate about the specifics; we don’t have any first-hand accounts from any of these converts, telling us *why* they felt compelled to change their lives and follow Jesus, but it’s clear that *something powerful happened*. Reports of their strong faith spread far and wide. They had become *convinced* of the truth of Paul’s words. And it was the *Holy Spirit* that did the convincing.

That gives us a little snapshot of how the Holy Spirit works. *Something happens* in people's hearts in response to the gospel message of Jesus Christ. Something that's hard to describe, something that defies rational explanation, something that impacts people *so dramatically* that they are willing to make *major changes* to how they are living life – even if some of those changes cause them pain.

But that's not all the Holy Spirit does, not by a long shot. It gives *blessings*. Isaiah identified seven gifts of the Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude (strength), knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord; see Isaiah 11:1-2); Paul mentions nine fruits of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; see Galatians 5:22-23); Paul and other biblical writers identify a variety of *spiritual gifts* that come through the Holy Spirit, including gifts of service, teaching, exhortation, mercy, healing, miracles, prophecy, hospitality, the discernment of spirits, the interpretation of dreams, and more (see 1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12; Ephesians 4; and 1 Peter 4). Don't get the *gifts of the Holy Spirit* and the *spiritual gifts* confused with each other; those are two different things that have similar names. Every Christian has access, through the Holy Spirit, to all seven gifts of the Spirit and all nine fruits of the Spirit; and every Christian is given some (but not all) of the *spiritual gifts*. We have the joy and the challenge of discovering what those are for us.

We are also baptized with the Holy Spirit. That's related to, but is not the same thing as, baptism with water. Baptism with water is something that *we* do. Baptism with the Holy Spirit is something that *God* does. Those are two different things. Just because *we* baptize someone with water doesn't necessarily mean that *God* has baptized that person with the Holy Spirit – and just because *God* has baptized someone with the Holy Spirit doesn't necessarily mean that they've been baptized with *water*. What we do with water is a visible sign, a seal, of what God does inwardly in our heart, but it is not a *guarantee* of baptism by the Holy Spirit. Which is why, whenever we baptize someone with water, we accompany that baptism with prayer: "may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, descend upon you, and dwell in your heart forever." We are *hoping* that will happen; we are *praying* that will happen; but we don't have the power to *make* that happen. Only *God* has that power – the power to give the power, so to speak: the *power of the Holy Spirit*. The power that came upon those Christians in Thessaloniki. The power that comes upon *us*, when God gives us the *gift* of the Holy Spirit.

*This* is the fourth day that changes everything. The day we receive the Holy Spirit. In previous weeks, I've talked about the lasting significance of Good Friday, Easter, and the Ascension – how the events of those days change *everything*, including *us*. The fourth day that changes everything is the day that the Holy Spirit starts to *move* in your heart. For three thousand people, it was the day of Pentecost, in Jerusalem, long ago. For others, it was the day they heard Paul preach, in the city of Thessaloniki. And for you – when was it? When did *you* start feeling the Holy Spirit move in *your* heart? When did *you* first start responding in faith to the gospel message of Jesus Christ? Maybe it was so long ago you don't even remember it clearly. Maybe for others, there was a specific day that you can clearly remember. Maybe for someone here, it hasn't happened yet. Maybe *this* is the day that changes everything. Maybe *this* is the day that the Holy Spirit baptizes *you*, the day that the Holy Spirit blesses *you* with gifts and fruit, the day that's going to change *your* life forever, the day your *new* life begins.

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