

Blowing in the Wind

John 14:15-27

May 27, 2007

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?"

Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

What's your take on miracles? Do they happen? Do you believe that in this day and age God actually makes miraculous things happen, things that can't be explained as anything but God? Or does everything always have a rational explanation; even if that explanation is that what looks like a miracle is nothing more than a coincidence, a figment of our imagination, or a product of superstition? What you believe says a lot about whether or not you will experience the Holy Spirit. Why? Because we tend to think, "Let God prove it and I'll believe," but what the Spirit teaches us is that if we believe, then we will see.

For example, consider what a member of our church told me in an e-mail last October:

Good morning Graham: I wanted to pass along a story of praise I have heard about. About a month ago the wife of a good friend of mine (also brother firefighter) had to have surgery for a large tumor. All of the pre-op testing indicated that it was cancer. As they were in a waiting area of the hospital prior to the surgery, they were both very scared & nervous, an elderly man walked up to them and touched her on the arm and said you will be fine and good luck. As it turned out it was NOT cancer and she is doing fine. He told me that this man reminded him of George Burns in the movie O GOD. I just wanted to pass this along to you as it has made an impact for me.

So is this just a coincidence, or is it providence. Is it a chance encounter or a God encounter? For me, I know that these kinds of experiences are providence. I know that they are evidence of the Holy Spirit in action. In fact, it's a belief in these kinds of possibilities, the possibilities of miracles, that separate Christian belief from that of most religions. I tend to have a great respect for other religions, but I also know that Christianity has aspects to it that others don't. Miracles from the Holy Spirit are one of those aspects. For instance, Buddhism doesn't necessarily believe in a personal God. They believe in a universal power and energy that we are to strive to live in consonance with. But they don't necessarily believe in or cultivate a belief that this universal power does miracles. Both Judaism and Islam have stories about miracles in their scriptures, but for them these miracles are generally considered to be rare experiences in rare times for rare people. The religions that are most likely to believe in miracles are nature religions or those with a belief in many gods. The problem with them is that they believe miracles happen only after appeasing a spirit or god. Only Christianity believes in the idea that God wants to care for us, and that God, through God's Spirit, is willing to give us a free, unmerited gift of grace that turns into miracles.

Christianity believes that God wants to do miracles, and that the Holy Spirit is always ready to do miracles for those who believe. We don't believe in order to appease God and get God to do a miracle. Belief and faith simply act to open the door to the possibility of a miracle. Christianity believes that the Holy Spirit is available to all of us, and that we can receive the Spirit,... if we are open to it. Again, let me give you an example from another e-mail I received last week from a member of Calvin Church. I asked her permission to share it with you. I don't want to give too many details about her life away, but I need to give you some just to give you an idea of why the story is so significant. She has been going through a very difficult time lately, and is now separated from her husband. As part of the separation, she had to move out of her house, put it on the market, and find a house with certain features in order to keep stability in her family's life. Here's what she wrote:

Hi Graham,

I wanted to let you know about the miraculous week, that I mentioned. I believe God speaks to me through other believers, who come in at the most perfect times and say or do things that make it clear they are acting in God's will.

A week ago Saturday, I looked at a house that was for sale by owner. It is perfect in many ways, ... and I knew that it was the right place for us. It is priced well in my range, and is even within my child's criteria of being on the same school bus run. I really thought that it would be impossible to fulfill that wish! God is good.

So, we still had to list and sell our current home. I talked to our real estate agent who has been my agent the past several transactions. We prayed about the houses and that God would make the path clear to me. I felt so blessed. That Thursday evening, she put our home in the multi-list, around 5 pm. 9:45 that evening was our first request for a showing. They came to look at the house in the morning, and by that afternoon, we had a full price offer on our home. Within 48 hours a signed contract.

We didn't ask too little, the right buyers were waiting for our home to list!

I know this is the right path for us. Thanks Graham for your help and prayers.

Another member has told me of how, several years ago, he had to give a major presentation early Monday morning to his company. It was to over 1000 people. He was working on his presentation late on a Sunday evening, and it just wasn't coming together. He called his assistant and gave him the power point slides, telling him to put them in whatever order made sense. Then he quit working, asked God in prayer to help him, watched some television, and went to bed. The next morning he trusted in the Spirit to help him with the presentation. He told me that it was the most amazing experience he had ever had. Every point he made, that exact slide was up on the screen. It was an experience of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is always around us and is always ready to do miracles in us. Unfortunately, the main problem with the Holy Spirit is that it isn't always predictable. It often acts in ways we don't expect, or on a timetable that is much slower than what we want, which means we have to be patient and we wait for the Holy Spirit. And worst of all, we have to trust. Let me show you what I mean.

I've experienced the Holy Spirit many times in my life. In fact, I experience the Spirit in many small ways at least two or three times a week. But there is one specific experience that really shows how the Spirit has worked in my life. I had a dramatic experience of the Holy Spirit after writing my book, *Becoming a Blessed Church*. I had the idea to write this book before I even came to Calvin Church. The book has to do with my whole vision for how to do church, a vision based on creating a church grounded in prayer that teaches members how to learn to rely on God's guidance both in the church and in our personal lives. I felt called to write this book before I came to Calvin Church—for over nine years—but I always sensed that the timing wasn't right. I felt called to write about how to create a spiritual church that emphasized bringing the whole community into a sense of prayerfulness and awareness of God's presence, yet in a way that was different from how spirituality has often been dealt with by the mainline church.

Even though I had the vision for writing the book, I also knew that I wasn't ready to do so until I had been here at Calvin Church for a while. After about five years here, I sensed that I was ready to write the book. Still, I wasn't sure if God was ready for me to write it. So in 2000 I asked God in prayer whether it was time to write the book. I sensed God saying, "not yet." After that, I approached God about three times a year in prayer, asking if it was time to write the book. Each time I sensed the answer was "not yet." So I wrote other books on the spiritual life, books such as *Paradoxes for Living* and *Discovering the Narrow Path*.

Then in January of 2003 I finally sensed that God was saying "yes." It was a strange moment because for the three previous years I had kept hearing in my heart, "not yet." When I finally sensed God saying "yes" I had to keep coming back to God over the next few weeks to make sure that it wasn't just me saying yes. By the way, I often hear God speaking to me, but not in a loud, audible voice. Generally I sense God speaking to me deep in my soul, through gentle tuggings or impressions. I've also learned to test that voice over time because I'm very

aware of how easy it is to substitute my own desires for what God wants. Anyway, over the course of the next year I wrote the book, and throughout the writing actively sensed God's hand on my shoulder, and almost, at times, God's voice whispering in my ear. I wrote the book, having no idea who would publish it. I finished writing the book in late January of 2004.

A week after finishing it, I received a telephone call in my office at the church. On the line was an editor, Beth Gaede, from The Alban Institute, an organization devoted to helping congregations become healthier. Beth had heard from someone else that I had some interesting ideas about another topic, and wanted to know if I was interested in turning those ideas into a book. I told her that those ideas were more suitable for an article, not a whole book. Pausing, I figured that I might as well as tell her about the book I had just written. I told her that I had just written another book on another topic, a book titled *Becoming the Blessed Church*. I asked her if she was interested in hearing about it. She said yes, so I described the book.

Even as I described the book, I was a bit reluctant because of what I knew about the books Alban had been publishing. The Alban Institute had a great reputation, and many of their previous publications and seminars helped me in my ministry, but my experience was that their books were more on topics such as conflict management. They were like business books for the church, and my book wasn't like that. I was reluctant to have them publish my book because it was spiritual in nature, even if it did integrate psychology, sociology, and corporate management ideas. I wasn't sure that the book would sell with them.

When I finished describing the book to Beth, I heard nothing but silence on the other end. After almost ten seconds of silence, ten seconds during which I was thinking, "See, they wouldn't know what to do with my book," she said, "Sorry for the silence. I just had chills go up my spine and I'm shaking a little bit. I just got out of a meeting with our director of publishing an hour ago. We had been talking about how we needed to change the direction of our books and move away from books on church growth and conflict management, and into books on bringing spirituality in to the church. We then outlined a particular book that we felt we needed to find someone to write. The problem is that we didn't know who to ask. For the last fifteen minutes you've been describing the very book that we had outlined. And you've already written it!"

That was the Holy Spirit in action. Think about it. What if I had decided to ignore the Spirit and had written the book three years earlier. I'm not sure it would have had much of an impact. As it is, I've been told that it's become one of Alban's best-sellers. The Spirit had me wait for a reason. The timing wasn't right. For three years God just kept saying, "not yet." When the timing was right, I wrote it and had it published. The result has been tremendous.

I've learned from this experience, and from many like it, that the Spirit will act in our lives, and do wonderful things, but we have to be trust and wait, trust and wait... As much as we might like to, we can't force the Spirit to work faster, and if we try we often end up getting frustrated and irritated as nothing happens.

In fact, when we don't experience the Spirit working, often it's because God is saying to us, "not yet, and not in the way you expect." Or it's God saying, "I need you to learn and grow, and then you'll see." Every once in a while the Spirit works immediately, but more often it is

slow. And then we tend to only understand what the Spirit has actually done when we look in the rearview mirror. It's rare that we understand the Holy Spirit's actions by looking through the front windshield. Think about the events on the Day of Pentecost when over 3000 people experienced the Holy Spirit. Here it is 2000 years later, and we are still trying to understand that day.

I do know one thing: we are supposed to be open to the Holy Spirit so that the Spirit can work in our lives. I also know that the Spirit wants to work in our lives. And if we choose to, we can experience the Spirit constantly in our lives. The question for you is, are you ready for the Spirit to act?

Amen.