

The term “Holy Spirit” sounds like one of those vague and illusive terms that really doesn’t mean anything at all. I remember growing up in the church I found the whole concept of the Holy Spirit confusing and even irritating, because nobody could ever explain it to my satisfaction. In Acts, chapter 19 we read of the apostle Paul coming to Ephesus, where he is trying to start a church. He finds some followers of Jesus there, and the first thing he asks them is this: “Did you receive the Holy Spirit?” They say, “What are you talking about? We do not know what that is.” I remember feeling that way myself. I would guess that this is still true for people both within and without the church today. What does it mean that the “Holy Spirit” drove Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days and nights? What does it mean that the “Holy Spirit” tells TV preachers to buy a Lear Jet? It is a concept that is hard to grasp, one of those “you know it when you see it” kind of things.

There is a story of a United Methodist Bishop who was asked to be the guest preacher at a session of Annual Conference. He was invited to preach 3 sermons but for weeks he did not respond to the written, email, or verbal invitations. Finally, the Secretary of the Conference sent a certified letter saying, “We must know immediately if you can preach for us.” The Bishop finally called to say that he was still waiting on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and that he would let them know of his decision within 2 weeks. Shortly thereafter he received another certified letter which said, “Bishop, we are withdrawing the invitation to preach at our Conference. We are not interested in anyone who lives 2 weeks away from the Holy Spirit.”

Interestingly enough, time and time again in the Bible, the activity of the Holy Spirit is considered an essential and distinctive mark of a Christian. John Wesley wrote, “A Christian is a person who has the Holy Spirit of God abroad in his heart.” In that old movie “Oh, God” that anyone under 50 has probably never heard of, the main character tells God, played by George Burns, that he is not a member of any church, or even very religious. God says, “That’s fine with me. I do not favor any particular religion, either. I want to be found in people’s hearts.” And that is what being filled with the Holy Spirit is really about, having God in your heart. When God lives in your heart, it is manifested in your life in ways that produce tangible results, just like those fruits of the Spirit that are listed in Galatians 5 which are: love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness and self-control. It is hard to grasp, hard to define, but you will know it when you see it.

Our Scripture lesson from John 14 has Jesus telling the disciples how he will survive in their hearts after his death. He says that although he is leaving them, he will give the Holy Spirit to comfort, bless and help them. This talk about his death is very troubling to the disciples, because they realize that the life they have known for 3 years is coming to an end, and they do not know how they will get along without him. As they feel the anxiety and tension, Jesus promises that he will not leave them orphaned. He assures them that he will be in their hearts, through the Holy Spirit. He will sustain and help them long after he is gone. So the Holy Spirit, which is also called Comforter and Sustainer, is the living presence of God with us and within us helping, comforting and guiding.

Now, did any of you know that the Summer Olympics were going on right now in Beijing, China? It is just remarkable to see the talent of the athletes and their accomplishments. How about that Michael Phelps? Some of these athletes have overcome such obstacles and challenges they are truly an inspiration.

Derek Redmond was just such an Olympic athlete. He was a young British runner, one who had sky rocketed to fame by shattering his country's 400-meter record at age 19. But then an Achilles tendon injury forced him to withdraw from the Olympic Games in Seoul, and he endured five separate surgeries. When the Summer Olympics arrived in Barcelona, Derek Redmond was absolutely aching for a medal. On the day of the 400-meter race, 65,000 fans streamed into the stadium, anxious to witness one of sports' most thrilling events. High in the stands is Derek's father, Jim, a faithful witness to every one of his son's races. The race began and Derek broke through the pack to seize the lead. Heading down the backstretch, only 175 meters from the finish line, Derek was a shoo-in to win this semifinal heat and qualify for the Olympic finals. But then Derek hears a pop. It's his right hamstring. He looks as if he has been shot. His leg quivering, Derek begins to hop on the other leg, and then he slows down and falls to the track. Medical personnel run toward him as he sprawls on the ground, holding his leg.

At the very same moment, there is a stir at the top of the stands. Jim Redmond, seeing his injured son, begins to race down to the track. He is sidestepping some people and bumping into others. He has no credentials or permission to be on the track, but all he can think about is getting to his son, to help him up. He is absolutely single-minded about this, and he isn't going to be stopped by anyone. On the track, Derek realizes that his dream of an Olympic medal is gone. The other runners streak across the finish line, he is orphaned, as it were, absolutely alone. Tears pour down Derek's face, and all he can think is, "I don't want to take a Did-Not-Finish."

When the medical crew arrives with a stretcher, Derek tells them, “There’s no way I’m getting on that stretcher. I’m going to finish my race.” And so he lifts himself to his feet, ever so slowly and carefully, and he starts hobbling down the track. Suddenly, the crowd realizes that Derek isn’t dropping out of the race. He isn’t limping off the track in defeat, but is actually continuing on one leg, in a fiercely determined effort to make it to the finish line. One painful step at a time, each one a little slower and more agonizing than the one before, Derek limps onward, and the crowd begins to cheer for him. The fans rise to their feet and their cries grow louder and louder, building into a thundering roar.

At that moment, Jim Redmond reaches the bottom of the stands, vaults over the railing, dodges a security guard, and runs out to his son — with two security people running after him trying to force him off the track. “That’s my son out there,” he yells back at his pursuers, “and I’m going to help him.” He reaches his son at the final curve, about 120 meters from the finish line, and wraps his arm around his waist. “I’m here, son, we will finish together.” (Show pictures)

Derek puts his arms around his father’s shoulders and sobs. Together, arm in arm, father and son struggle toward the finish line with 65,000 people cheering and clapping. Just a few steps from the end, with the crowd in an absolute frenzy, Jim releases the grip he has on his son so that Derek can cross the finish line by himself. “I’m the proudest father alive,” Jim Redmond tells the press afterward, with tears in his eyes. “I’m prouder of him than I would have been if he had won the Gold Medal. It took a lot of guts for him to do what he did.” Together, they were able to finish the race. Later Derek told reporters that he could not have finished without his father’s presence and support.

I share that story with you today, because that is the way that the Holy Spirit has worked in my life. At times when I felt like I could not get up, could not go forward, when I felt injured, defeated, or sidetracked, the living Spirit of God has lifted me and sustained me. That spirit comes to bless, guide, and energize us in supernatural ways, allowing us to endure, persevere and even do things we never imagined we would do. It keeps us in the race, even when we feel like giving up. And having that power with us brings changes and results in our lives.

So what does a Spirit Filled Life really look like? It is a life with different direction, priorities, and fruits. A life not so easily swayed by the values of this world, but with more ethical, spiritual values. It is a life that is grounded not with a knowledge of formulas or words or even actions, but knowledge of the invisible and mysterious. It is an understanding of feeling, experience and wisdom gained from suffering and success, and a deep trust in that which you cannot see.

I would describe a Spirit Filled Life as one with Depth, Empowerment, Disruption and Love.

**Depth.** Jesus said that The Holy Spirit is the *Spirit of life*. Because I live, promises his followers, “you also will live”. The same God who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to us, and not just eternal life after death but abundant life here and now. No matter what tragedies come our way, we can hold tight to the promise that Jesus gives us the gift of life. And this knowledge gives us a depth to our daily living that others simply do not have. We know that there is more to life than grabbing all of the material resources we can get and impressing others. We know that forgiveness and mercy and compassion are gifts that we give to others and ourselves. We know that setbacks are temporary, that ultimately nothing can finally defeat us, because there is a spiritual reality to all things. Spirit filled people are not shallow or superficial, but deep.

Secondly, a Spirit filled life is an **Empowered** life. It brings a power to do what we never dreamed we could do, just like Derek Redmond finishing his race, and like those gathered on that first day of Pentecost. Those fearful and depressed disciples were hiding out, worried someone would find them. But after they received the Holy Spirit they were transformed. While they were fearful before, they were courageous afterward. While they were hesitant before they were bold afterward. That sort of supernatural empowerment stands up to fear.

The Holy Spirit also **Disrupts**. It lets us know that when God is a part of something, it is not business as usual. It is no longer about us and our carefully laid plans. Unexpected detours and scenarios unfold when the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives. Anything is possible, because ours is an active, moving, creative God who does astonishing things in this world, even with us. I have found that when I do trust in God, and place my life in God’s hands, miraculous things happen, and they are never what I planned or expected. The Holy Spirit disrupts.

Finally a Spirit filled life radiates **Love**. Jesus said, “Those who love me will be loved by God and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” Those who are filled with the spirit have love in their hearts. They love God, themselves, and a hurting humanity. God’s spirit allows us to have love for others because we have experienced that love in our own lives. When we know what an undeserved gift it is to be loved with all of our imperfections. And so we are able to pass that sort of love on to others, with God’s help, and only with God’s help.

Having the Spirit of God alive in your heart is a distinctive mark of a Christian. That Spirit allows us to persevere and not give up, no matter how hard things get for us. That Spirit brings a depth to our lives that counteracts the

shallow and superficial values of this world. That Spirit empowers us to be courageous risk takers and manifests itself in the way we live our lives, most notably by the fruits that are love, joy, peace, kindness, gentleness, self-control.

A Spirit filled life is a life that matters. A life that makes a difference. May our lives manifest the loving spirit of God in us in order to bless this world. Amen