

1 The Spirit in a Time of Chaos

2020 will live long in the memory. We've been told that those of us who lived through the Coronavirus pandemic will talk about it, like our grandparents talked about the war. Whether or not that is actually true, only time will tell, but the global disruption has created a bump in our collective roads that means there will be stories to tell for some time to come.

Some will look back with sadness at the passing of a loved one or the loss of a job. For others the memories will be marked by regret, as the grades they needed for university didn't materialise or the pressure of lockdown was the last straw for their already creaking marriage. For some, however, the bump in the road was just what they needed to jolt them into action and they look back with gratitude. The loss of their job was what led to them starting their now successful business. The personal upheaval was the catalyst for finally getting healthy. The sense of fragility was what led them to look up, and to reach out to God.

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Some will look back on this time as life-changing; they will thank God for Covid-19, for eternity. Their stories will be told with a smile, because it was during this time that God got their attention and drew them to Jesus Christ.

Many people's lives have taken lots of different turns, some good, some bad. This is the stuff of life. 2020 was a year when people died, got sick, lost their jobs, took opportunities, made money, changed their lives – just like they did in 2019, and will do every year until God calls time on history. What made 2020 different was the intensity of it all. More people were affected more significantly than in other years, but the fundamental realities were the same. We still live in a world that is full of beauty and joy, whilst at the same time cursed because of sin. The requirements that God makes of us remain the same as well. Jesus says in John 15 to abide in Him and bear fruit that will last. He wants us to do this, whether the sun is shining or it feels like the sky is falling in. Because abiding in Jesus is a posture of the heart, we can do it anywhere; because bearing fruit is about our character, we can pursue it anywhere.

Jesus makes this call for fruitfulness just after He has promised to send the Holy Spirit, and this puts what He says in context. Jesus will go to the cross to die for the sin of the world; He will rise again three days later to vindicate Himself as God's Son. Death can't hold Him; He puts death to death. Then having completed this work, He will return to heaven.

But when He does that, He doesn't leave His people to fend for themselves – those who have put their faith in Him and received the salvation He offers. He sends His Spirit to live in them and to enable them to 'be fruitful', as He calls them to be.

The fruitful life flows from the work of God's Holy Spirit at work in believers. That's why we abide in Him: He is the source of this fruit. In

Galatians Chapter 5, the Apostle Paul outlines what it actually looks like: 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (5:22-23).

This is a beautiful list of qualities. Whatever you believe about the world, about humanity, these are qualities that you admire in others, and you wish you displayed more readily yourself. Who doesn't wish they were more loving, had a deeper peace in their lives, and demonstrated more kindness in their home and with their colleagues? It's not something people tend to say in conversation. 'How are you today?' 'Oh I'm fine. I just wish I was gentler.' But we all wish we embodied these things more than we do.

What Paul's words here show us is that on the one hand, *it is possible*. This is not a list of ideal, desirable but ultimately unattainable qualities. These things can actually characterise our lives. On the other hand, *it is expected* that these qualities will be visible in the life of a Christian.

Such people (in the context of Galatians), having been put right with God through the finished work of Christ, have been brought into the family of God through faith in Christ and nothing else. Those who are heirs of the promise of glory, and have been set free from religious observance, are Paul's longhand for what it means to be 'Christian'. Those are the people to whom the Spirit comes, and in whom He works to bear this fruit.

HEEDING THE CALL

We must start by heeding the call. The section, Galatians 5:13-26, contrasts two possible ways of living your life: two kinds of engine, if you like, that will power how you live. One is the Spirit, and the other, Paul describes as 'the flesh'. And living out of the flesh shows itself in its own grisly list. It covers the ...

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- Sexual ... sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,
- Sacred ... idolatry, sorcery,
- Social ... enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies ...

Just to make sure he hasn't missed anything, Paul adds 'and things like these' (5:21). The list isn't exhaustive – the flesh always finds new ways of serving itself, inventive ways of attending to its appetites. But when you look down the two lists of qualities, it is obvious that they don't overlap at any point. The fruit of the Spirit stands in stark contrast to the works of the flesh. And Paul calls his hearers to pursue one and not the other. The section is bookended by similar phrases: 'walk by the Spirit ...' (5:16) and 'if we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit ...' (5:25, Christian Standard Bible).

This is the call. We are to live our lives in step with the Spirit's work. What does that actually mean? A 'Spirit-filled' life, walking by the Spirit, very simply looks like a life shaped by love, joy, peace, patience and so on, and not enmity, jealousy, fits of anger and similar. So Paul expects us to be able to tell if someone is 'Spirit-filled', without knowing or understanding a whole lot about what they think or believe about the world. We should be able to tell by spending time with them. How can you tell if someone is in step with the Spirit? Their lives are full of those lovely qualities. Here we need to clarify several points in order to avoid misunderstanding.

A singular fruit: The word in the original that is translated here as 'fruit' is singular. It isn't *fruits* of the Spirit, like these are different kinds of fruit that the Spirit gives. No, Paul is describing the different characteristics of the singular grace that the Spirit is working in the believer. There is obviously still some value in considering each aspect of this grace – a bit like a gemstone with different facets that reflect

the beauty of the stone in slightly different ways. But we mustn't think of them as separate qualities; they come as a whole. If you are a growing Christian, you should be growing in all of these qualities. If that is not the case, it is possible that your joy is just a dispositional happiness, or your patience is just a dispositional dispassion.

A slow-growing fruit: These qualities don't all appear at once. The fruit has to grow and it has to mature, and sometimes the growing season is longer than we would like. We all have a fruit of choice that we particularly enjoy eating. For me it is mangoes. I would like a tree that grew mangoes, and when I picked one another replaced it straight away. That's not how it works, and yet we can often be like this with our expectations for spiritual fruit. We don't want to wait, and when we see it in our lives we want more straight away. We can also be like this with our expectations of others, whether our children, or those in our churches and small groups. But we need patience (of course we do, that's what we're talking about!) because this is not how fruit grows. The important thing about fruit is, if it is growing, you see it, you know it is there – it's the same with spiritual fruit.

So bearing the fruit of the Spirit isn't an optional extra for some elite Christians (there's no such thing!). The Spirit works this fruit in us all, and we should expect to see it. It won't all mature at once and it takes time to grow, but it should be visible. If, when you look at your life honestly, you think the first list is more obvious than the second, there's a problem. What does your life reveal? Impurity? What's your online life like? Dissensions? Anger is cultural currency at the moment. Unless you are outraged on Twitter no one can hear your voice. Drunkenness? How's your drinking? If you are calling yourself a Christian, wherever you see the fruit of the flesh, you must repent of it, and seek the Lord for change. God's people have been called to walk in step with the Spirit.

But that is tough. We need to recognise how difficult heeding this call actually is. Nowhere in Paul's writing does he shy away from this, the flesh and the Spirit. Our natural desires and the work of God, are in conflict with each other.

CHOOSING THE CONFLICT

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do (Gal. 5:17).

To put it most simply, when you heed the call, you are choosing conflict. The reason for this is that there is an irreconcilable war being waged between the two sides. This chapter is called 'the Spirit in a time of chaos', and that is only partly a reference to the confusion we are living through in our culture today. It is primarily a description of what it is like to live in the midst of this spiritual war.

Our sinful nature desires the grisly list of qualities, while the Spirit living in us desires that very different kind of fruit. So the Christian will always feel a bit like they are being pulled in multiple directions. But the bottom line is that you have to take a side. I wrote earlier that these two lists do not overlap at any point. If you will be led by the Spirit (v. 18), you must crucify the flesh (v. 24) with its passions and desires.

So it is time to pick a side, to declare our allegiance, to choose for whom we are doing battle. The word that Paul uses is 'crucifixion' – the requirement to put the old nature, the old fleshly man, to death. You have to do this every day, every moment sometimes. The really annoying thing is that it feels like that old man is impossible to kill. He won't stay dead. We think we've beaten him, we turn to walk away and he's there again, whispering in our ear, tempting us to go back.

‘Do you want to keep fighting like this? Do you think that’s what God has for you? Here’s the good life over here. Surely God just wants you to be happy, whatever that involves?’

Paul elsewhere¹ is unmistakably clear: ‘put to death’. You simply cannot do a deal with the flesh. There’s no treaty that can be struck. So it’s a case of choosing the conflict and engaging the enemy again and again and again.

The atheist journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates understands this battle better than many Christians. Writing in the *The Atlantic*, back in 2012, he said this:

I’ve been with my spouse for almost fifteen years. In those years I’ve never been with anyone, but the mother of my son. But that’s not because I’m an especially good and true person. In fact, I am wholly in possession of an unimaginably filthy and mongrel mind. But I [also believe in] guard rails. . . . I don’t believe in getting in the moment and then exercising willpower. I believe in avoiding the moment. I believe in being absolutely clear with myself about why I am having a second drink and why I am not. Why I am going to a party and why I am not. I believe that the battle is lost at happy hour, not at the hotel. I am not a good man, but I am prepared to be an honourable one. This is not just true of infidelity, it’s true of virtually everything I’ve ever done in my life. I did not lose seventy pounds through strength of character, goodness, or will power. My character and will angles towards cheesecake, fried chicken, and beer in no particular order. I lost that weight by not fighting a battle on desires terms, but fighting before desire can take effect. There are compacts I have made with myself and with my family. There are other compacts we make with our country and society. I tend

1 Colossians 3:5.

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to think those compacts work best when we do not flatter ourselves, when we are fully aware of the animal in us.²

If you are going to follow Christ and bear the kind of fruit that He requires, this is the conflict you have to get involved in. For some of us this challenge is more than we can take. We think: 'It's too hard, life shouldn't be this tough . . . I don't like conflict!' Unfortunately, we don't have a choice. If we want to bear the fruit of God's grace we have to kill the flesh. But Paul closes with a motivation that should inspire even the weariest among us. He highlights the stakes involved. 'I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God' (5:21). It is possible to name the name of Jesus, but still to be living according to the flesh, and when that's the case you forfeit glory. You pass up eternity in God's kingdom. When this is the alternative, you can see it is a battle worth fighting to the death.

It's so important, however, to remember that it's a battle that has already been won on our behalf. Paul, you can see, has been at pains to insist to the Galatians that in Christ they are free – free from the religious requirements of the law – because they have been freed from slavery to sin. The old man, the flesh, doesn't hold them captive any longer. In our lives there are times when it feels like he does, when we feel overwhelmed by temptation or even failure. But when the Spirit lives in us He enables us to fight, and to keep fighting.

If the only power at work in you is your sinful nature, however hard you try, you always fall back into these things. But if God's Spirit is at work, He has dealt sin a fatal blow in the death of Jesus, proving this in the empty tomb. You therefore have been set free to heed this call, and to choose the conflict. You fight with confidence *because* victory is assured.

² Ta-Nehisi Coates 'Violence & The Social Contract: Power Changes People,' *The Atlantic*, Dec. 20, 2012.