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Power!
1 Corinthians 2:1-5

There is a spiritual or theological reality, a truth, apart from which nothing in Christianity makes sense and apart from which nothing could ever be accomplished. It is central to Christian living and ministry. Without it we are hopeless and helpless. I'm talking about *God's supernatural power abiding within and operative throughout everything we do*.

Precisely what do we mean when we speak of supernatural power or the power of the Holy Spirit? As you know, secular humanists, atheists, and those who might be called materialists or naturalists insist that there is nothing more to reality than what we can see, taste, smell, touch, or hear. All reality is entirely physical in nature. There is nothing above, beyond, or in addition to the material universe. Every effect can always be accounted for by appeal to a physical cause.

The biblical worldview, on the other hand, is altogether supernatural. That is to say, we believe that the physical universe is entirely the product or effect of a spiritual, non-material cause, namely, the power of God. Above, beyond, and in addition to the material universe there is a world or realm of the immaterial or spiritual. God is himself a spirit. God's power, the sort of power that dwells within every born-again believer and energizes his/her life and ministry is not the sort of "thing" that you can touch or contain in a bottle. *It is the very energy of the life of God himself. It is the supernatural energy that emanates from God's being.*

This energy or power creates the material universe out of nothing. This energy or power upholds or sustains all material reality in being. This energy or power can destroy and annihilate material reality at any time. This energy or power can part the water of the Red Sea and produce a cloud of fire to guide the people of Israel and can inflict disease on God's enemies and can enable a young virgin to conceive a child and can raise a dead man back to life again.

What concerns us today is the glorious and encouraging truth that *this supernatural and divine energy or power quite literally fills and indwells the bodies and souls of every born-again believer*. God does not call upon us to speculate about the nature of this power. He does not want us to envision it merely as an idea. His desire is that we avail ourselves of it to partner with him in his purposes on the earth. His desire is that we cry out to him that he might intensify and expand and increase and deepen the manifestation of this power through us in ever more demonstrative and tangible ways in our lives.

If you make any attempt to live an ordinary daily existence without this power animating and energizing your body, soul, spirit, will, and affections, you will know nothing of the greatness and glory of God and all he is for us in Jesus. If you make any attempt to get up in the morning and pursue any form of so-called Christian ministry apart from a conscious prayer for more of this power and a conscious dependence upon it to enable you to do what otherwise you could never hope to do, you will never enter into the fullness of what God has designed for you and for those to whom you might minister.

Consider this declaration of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 3. I say "declaration" when it is in point of fact a prayer, a request, an earnest petition to God himself:

"For his sake [i.e., Christ's sake] I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith – *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection*, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:8b-11).

Paul isn't asking God for more theoretical knowledge about the resurrection of Jesus or the powerful means by which he was brought back to life. He isn't asking that he be provided with more arguments to prove to unbelievers that Jesus came back to life. He is asking God that he might *personally experience* the very supernatural power that was

exerted by the Holy Spirit that reversed the decomposition of the body of Jesus, the supernatural energy that restored life to a corpse, the supernatural energy that overcame and reversed the entropy and decay to which the body of Jesus would otherwise be subjected.

He is asking, hoping, praying for a taste of that power, the ability to feel it in his own body, the opportunity for that very divine energy to course through his being and to heal other people's diseased bodies and to raise other dead people to life again. He is asking that he might sense and know intimately the reality of this transcendent energy so that he himself might resist temptation and overcome the Devil and pray in a language that transcends human speech patterns. He is asking that this very power that brought everything into existence out of nothing and raised the crucified body of Jesus to life again might equip him to know things about people that he otherwise could not have known.

Do you want to know the power of Christ's resurrection? Do you realize that this very power is already in you, that it is resident in your heart and mind and hands and your speech? Do you realize that this very power that raised Jesus from the dead, the power of God the Holy Spirit himself, abides and dwells in you right now precisely so that you might *transcend the limitations of your finite existence* and perform supernatural deeds like those performed by Jesus? On what basis do I say this? Is it mere wishful thinking or the fruit of an overly-exercised charismatic fanatic? Consider these texts, which are only a few of the many I could cite:

“[I pray] that the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, **and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come**” (Eph. 1:17-21).

The apostle could not have said it any clearer than that! He is asking God the Father to *impart* to the Ephesian Christians the self-same power, the precise supernatural energy that God exerted when he reanimated and raised from the dead the body of Jesus. This is the self-same power and supernatural energy that exalted Jesus to the right hand of God and subjected every demon and every other human authority to his rule and reign. This is the power that God wants you to experience and feel and put into practice when you evangelize the lost or exercise your spiritual gift or pray for the sick.

And it doesn't stop there. A little later in Ephesians 3, Paul again prays that God would “grant you [and me] to be strengthened with power [not merely with ideas or exhortations or steroid injections; no, with supernatural energy] through his Spirit in your inner being” (3:16). Observe closely where this power abides and operates. It is not on the shelf in your living room. It is not in your car. It is not in the books that you read. It is not in the words of a conference speaker. It is in “*your inner being*” that the Spirit operates in this powerful manner. And if that isn't enough to convince you, Paul concludes this prayer with these famous but all-too-often neglected words:

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power [written about in theology textbooks; well, no; talked about at Christian conferences; well, no; this power is] **at work within us**, to him be glory in the church and in Jesus Christ through all generations, forever and ever, Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21).

What a great and mighty God we have, a God who can infinitely exceed our highest expectations, dreams, prayers, or hopes. But *where* is it that God does all such things? Through what means? It is by means of or in accordance with his supernatural power. Yes, but *where* does this supernatural power reside? Where does it do its work? Paul says it is “*within us*”! It is *inside* and *through* Christians like you and me. No matter how expansive were your prayers for things you hoped God might do for you, he can do infinitely and exceedingly and abundantly beyond it all. And he does it by means of his own supernatural and divine power that lives in and pulsates and energizes you and me!

When Paul explained to the Colossian Christians how he managed to persevere in his ministry, this is how he said it: “For this I toil, struggling with all **his energy that he powerfully works within me**” (Col. 1:19). God infuses his very own supernatural energy into his servants. This energy, says Paul, works “within” us powerfully.

This “power” of the Holy Spirit, this power which *is* the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35; 4:14; 5:17; Acts 10:38; Rom. 15:19) is not an idea or doctrinal assertion. It is not an abstract, independent, free-floating thing out there somewhere. It is an *experiential strengthening presence* that God intends for us to receive and enjoy and employ.

You can see from these texts that experiencing the power of God the Holy Spirit is not an exceptional, rare, or sporadic phenomenon but is intended by God to be the routine, ordinary, daily reality in the life of every believer, regardless of their education, social standing, financial status, or role in the church.

Every facet of the life of every child of God is designed to be an expression of spiritual power: in prayer, in the exercise of gifts, in persevering under oppression, in our resistance to temptation, in loving our spouses, in being diligent and faithful at work, etc.

Paul says in Romans 15:13 that it is only through the “power” of the Holy Spirit that we are enabled to “abound in hope”. He says in Colossians 1:11 that it is only when we are “strengthened with power” that we can endure and remain patient and do it with joy! He again says in 2 Thessalonians 1:11 that “every resolve for good and every work of faith” that you and I accomplish is by means of his “power.” Power is the energy or working of God by which we are saved (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18, 24). And if that were not enough to convince you, the very kingdom of God in its essence consists not “in talk but in power” (1 Cor. 4:20). If you only had one word to describe the vast topic of the kingdom of God, it would be *power!*

Do you understand that this “power” is something not only that God has but something that he generously and abundantly gives to us? This is what we mean by the word *impartation*. We’ve already seen in Ephesians 1 and 3 that this power is given to us, dwells inside us, and works within us. But we see this in numerous other places as well:

“And he called the twelve together and *gave them power* and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:1-2).

“And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are *clothed with power* from on high” (Luke 24:49).

“But you will *receive power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8).

And what was this “power” to which Jesus refers and promises will be ours? It is the same “power” of the Holy Spirit on which he himself consciously depended and employed to heal the sick.

“On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal” (Luke 5:17).

This is only one of several texts that tell us that *even Jesus was the recipient of the power of the Holy Spirit* that enabled him to do everything in his ministry.

“You yourselves know . . . how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38).

On several occasions we read in the gospels that “power” *goes out of* Jesus. It is *transferable*. His power is *imparted* to others merely by touch:

“And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my garments?’” (Mark 5:30; cf. Luke 8:46).

Jesus felt the power of the Holy Spirit go out of him and the woman felt the power of the Holy Spirit enter into her body. Indeed, we read in Luke 6:19 that “all the crowd sought to touch him, for *power came out from him* and healed them all.”

My aim in this message is simple. ***I want to reconfigure your world view.*** I want you to undergo a paradigm shift that will touch and transform every feature and facet of your life. Your perspective on life and ministry in the local church must undergo a radical change, a turning inside out of the framework through which you envision what it means to be a Christian.

I'm not talking about ***fleshly triumphalism*** in which we live above and immune to weakness or frailty or rejection or loss. I'm talking about feeling and drawing on the supernatural, energizing presence of the Holy Spirit to do everything we're called to do. Weak and impotent people must be strengthened to do powerful things by the Holy Spirit. This is to be ordinary Christian living. Ordinary Christian living is intended by God to be extraordinary in the sense that we who are in ourselves finite and weak are empowered to do supernatural and mighty works.

Let me pause here and get something out of the way right up front. ***There are people in the charismatic community who understand God's power to be a ticket out of trial and tribulation.*** Power, to them, is the mechanism by which God intends to deliver them from weakness and persecution and financial pressure. But a consistent theme in Scripture is that ***the power of God is most clearly in evidence when it is seen in contrast with our weakness, indeed, when it is displayed and manifested precisely through and in the full light of our weakness.***

For example, when Paul visited Corinth he declared that it was "in weakness and in fear and much trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3). His eloquence wasn't nearly up to the standards of his opponents. "My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom." No, my entire presence and ministry among you came "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:4-5). Far from proving to be a hindrance to supernatural and divine power, Paul's weakness was the platform on which it was gloriously displayed.

Again, Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 4:7 that "we have this treasure [of the gospel] in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." Later in this epistle, after asking the Lord repeatedly that his thorn in the flesh be removed, he quoted the words of Jesus himself who spoke to him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in [your] weakness." Paul in turn declared, "therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

And don't ever forget that this same man who embraced his own personal weakness later says in that same chapter that his ministry to the Corinthians was performed "with signs and wonders and might works" (2 Cor. 12:12; see also 2 Tim. 1:8; Rev. 12:11).

I'm not trying to provide you with a formula for personal triumph. I'm not here to add fuel to the fleshly ambition in your heart. ***I simply want to direct your attention in practical ways to the reality of God's supernatural, divine, strengthening power that manifests itself in and through you by the Holy Spirit, particularly in the spiritual gifts that God imparts to us so that we might serve others and grow up into maturity in Christ, all for his glory.***

Power for Spiritual Gifts

Now, let's bring this to a conclusion by focusing on the power of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of energizing spiritual gifts, whether prophecy or healing or tongues or for the performance of signs and wonders.

Numerous times in the four gospels where the signs, wonders, and miracles of Jesus are described, the phrase "***mighty works***" in the ESV is simply the English rendering of the plural form of the word for "***power***" (Matthew 11:20-21, 23; 13:54, 58; 14:2; Mark 6:2, 5, 14; 9:39; Luke 19:37; Acts 2:22).

We see the same thing in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 and 1 Thessalonians 1:5. In both of these texts, power is the tangible, visible, vocal work of the Holy Spirit performing miracles through God's people.

"and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:4-5).

“because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5).

We read several times in the NT about the spiritual gift of miracles or the ability to perform miracles. In most cases the word translated “miracles” is again the Greek word for “power”. When Paul refers to “the working of miracles” as a spiritual gift in 1 Corinthians 12:10 and again in 12:28 he simply uses the one word “powers”. In Galatians 3:5 he asks the believers in that church: “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles [powers] among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?”

Or consider a passage that all of us probably know by heart, **Acts 1:8** – “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Most of you probably have been taught that the “power” that Jesus says we will receive is solely or even primarily for sharing the gospel. It most assuredly does enable us to overcome fear and speak the gospel clearly. But that is not Luke’s primary point. How do I know this?

Luke, who wrote both the gospel that bears his name and the book of Acts, uses the word “power” (*dunamis*) 25x. In twenty of those twenty-five occasions it describes what God does either through Jesus (10x) or through ordinary Christians (10x). In eight of the ten verses where “power” refers to what God does through Jesus (Luke 4:14; 4:36; 5:1; 6:19; 8:46; 10:13; 19:37; 21:27; Acts 2:22; 10:38) it has reference to his miracles, his signs and wonders.

In nine of the verses that the word “power” is used to describe what God does through believers it is with reference to miracles or signs and wonders (Luke 1:15-17 [power of Elijah in preaching]; 9:1-2; 24:49; Acts 3:12; 4:7; 4:32-33; 6:8; 8:13; 19:11). Do you know what the tenth and final verse is where “power” is used? It is Acts 1:8! Acts 1:8 structures and governs what will unfold in the book and in the experience of the church. ***If in the other 9x where Luke uses “power” it always refers to the working of miracles, it seems reasonable to conclude that this is precisely what he means in Acts 1:8! Power for working miracles was to be an essential and expected element in the work of the ministry, together with power for preaching and witnessing.***

Stop and consider again what Jesus said in Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:8, both references to the power of the Holy Spirit being poured out upon and given to all believers. I can almost envision this conversation taking place between Jesus and his disciples:

“OK, Lord, slow down and let me make sure I understand what you are saying. Are you suggesting that the power that was ‘present’ with you in the midst of all those religious leaders, the ‘power’ that you said enabled you to heal sick people and restore sight to the blind (Luke 5:17), are you saying that this very ‘power’ is going to be given to us?”

Undoubtedly with a huge grin on his face, Jesus says: “Yeah, that’s precisely what I’m saying.”

“OK, let me ask the question a bit differently. Are you saying that the ‘power’ that went out from your body and into the body of that woman who had been bleeding every day for 12 years and healed her instantly, are you saying that this is the ‘power’ with which we are going to be clothed and filled?”

“You got it,” said Jesus.

“OK, thanks for being patient with me. Just one more question. Are you telling us that the ‘power’ by which you drove out demons and the ‘power’ by which you preached with amazing authority and the ‘power’ by which you performed signs and wonders is the ‘power’ that you just said will come into us in fulfillment of a rock-solid unbreakable promise made by our Heavenly Father?”

“Yep.”

Conclusion

I mentioned a moment ago that God’s power works “within us” to enable us to do exceedingly and abundantly beyond what we otherwise might hope to do. But it’s important that you see the catalyst for this experience of divine power.

Where does it come from? Who is its recipient? The answer is found in the prayer of Paul that precedes in Ephesian 3:14-19. Power is the fruit of intimacy! Power works most powerfully in those whose hearts are flooded with the reality of God's passionate affection for them. Power is present most visible and vocally in and through those whose love for God is most intense and sustained.