

2 TIMOTHY 1:7

WHO CAN WE BLAME?

“God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.”¹

It was an exceptional week, even for a broken world. One morning in June, we awoke to horrific news that an alligator had dragged a two-year-old boy into a lake at Walt Disney World. Though the presence of alligators had been known to the staff, Disney had failed to close the beaches at its resorts. More than fifty law-enforcement personnel searched the lake; they eventually found the boy's body. Some blamed Disney for not posting signs warning about alligators in the water. Others were quick to blame the parents. As with the boy who fell into a gorilla pit in Cincinnati, people on social media lambasted the mother and father for allowing their son to play in the water. Christian commentator Jim Denison asked, “Why do we feel such a need to assign blame when tragedy strikes?”²

Immediately after reporting almost every tragedy, the media begins looking for motives. Making the task of assigning motive more difficult is the fact that officials are inevitably reluctant to assign motive—even when motive is apparent! After the shooting at the Orlando gay nightclub, the media, looking for motives, questioned whether Omar Mateen was conflicted about his sexuality? Was he truly inspired by ISIS?³ Meanwhile, authorities were still seeking a motive for the killing of singer Christina Grimmie. Since the murderer killed himself, we may never know his reasons.⁴ More recently, though admitting he shot and killed victims in the Burlington Mall, police cannot say what motive Arcan Cetin may have had for the shooting.⁵

We tend to justify our search for motives by saying that we want to know *why* tragedy strikes so we can prevent future tragedies. We reason that if Disney or the parents could have done something to prevent the alligator attack, people could be saved in the future. If we can understand why murderers kill, perhaps we can prevent homicides in the future.

But there's more to the story. Dr. Denison notes that “according to the United Nations, 437,000 people around the world were murdered in 2012 (their most recent report). However, National Geographic reports that 725,000 people die every year from diseases transmitted by mosquitoes. Freshwater snails transmit schistosomiasis, which kills between 20,000 and 200,000 a year. Annually, snakes kill 94,000 to 125,000 people; scorpions kill 3,250 people; sharks kill six people. And there's no one to accuse for any of these tragedies.”⁶

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Dr. Jim Denison, “Disney Tragedy: Blame and Redemption,” Thursday, 16 June 2016, Denison Forum on Truth and Culture, <http://www.denisonforum.org/cultural-commentary/2658-disney-tragedy-blame-and-redemption>, accessed 27 September 2016

³ See “Omar Mateen: What we know about the gunman in the Florida mass shooting,” CBC News, Jun 13, 2016 <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/omar-mateen-what-we-know-1.3631708> accessed 27 September 2016

⁴ Elizabeth Chuck, “Gunman Who Killed ‘Voice’ Singer Christina Grimmie ID’d as Kevin James Loibl: Police,” June 11 2016, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/crime-courts/gunman-who-killed-voice-singer-christina-grimmie-id-d-kevin-n590316>, accessed 27 September 2016

⁵ Liz Burch, “UPDATE: Bail set at \$2 million for man who confessed to mall shooting,” KHQ, Sep 26, 2016, <http://www.khq.com/story/33187928/arcan-cetin-what-we-know-about-burlington-mall-shooting-suspect>, accessed 27 September 2016; Jake Ellison, “Oak Harbor man, 20, arrested in Cascade Mall killings,” Seattlepi, September 25, 2016, <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/crime/article/Burlington-mall-shooting-suspect-killed-5-9259163.php>, accessed 27 September 2016

⁶ Denison, Ibid.

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Perhaps you recall the sustained hue and cry following the shooting of Cecil the Lion. However, on the day Cecil died, 5,296 African children died of preventable disease!⁷ Society tends to focus on emotion-driven issues, ignoring true tragedy. It is human nature to blame others; this allows us to maintain the illusion of safety for ourselves. Perhaps we wouldn't allow our children to play at the edge of the Disney lagoon, but how many other times did we unknowingly put them at risk? It is doubtful that we would keep our children from ever going to the mall or even attempt to restrict loved ones from attending an office party.

Though we should exert every effort to prevent tragedies, we should also admit that much of life is beyond our control, as is emphasised repeatedly in the Word of God. James warns us, "You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" [JAMES 4:14].

Solomon has written this cautionary warning for each of us:

"Do not boast about tomorrow,
for you do not know what a day may bring."

[PROVERBS 27:11]

Jesus has taught those who would follow Him, "Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble" [MATTHEW 6:34].

Know that the same law of gravity that enables us to walk causes us harm when we fall. Again, alligators are essential to the Florida ecosystem; but alligators are dangerous to humans. Natural laws cannot exist without the consequences arising from these same laws. Therefore, control what you can and trust your Father for what you cannot. Remember that "God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control" [2 TIMOTHY 1:7]. Then, work at making courage and serenity part of your witness to a fallen culture [see ISAIAH 26:3].

THE GIFT OF GOD — "God gave us a spirit." Paul had just urged the young pastor "to fan into flame the gift of God" [2 TIMOTHY 1:6]. The times in which Timothy served were intimidating at best and terrifying at worst. Early congregations were beset by religious opponents intent on extirpating the Faith from the earth. At best, political leaders were indifferent to the welfare of the faithful. The congregation in Ephesus was born under threat of riot—and a riot did break out eventually. After cutting into the profits of silversmiths who crafted images of their goddess, the guild turned against the Christians and sought to rid themselves of these whom they saw as the source of their troubles [see ACTS 19:21-41].

What took place in Ephesus was a continuation of troubles in each place where the Faith had been established. The course of the early work included opposition from the Jews of Pisidian Antioch [see ACTS 13:44-51], saw Paul stoned in Lystra [see ACTS 14:19], saw the missionaries imprisoned in Philippi [see ACTS 16:16-24], riots in Thessalonica [see ACTS 17:5-9], opposition in Berea [see ACTS 17:13, 14] and Jewish hostility in Corinth [see ACTS 18:12-17].

In light of very real hostility and uncertainty arising from the times in which the Faith appeared, Timothy needed to be encouraged to stop looking around in fear and to look again to God's work. Paul wrote, "God gave us a Spirit," using the aorist tense for the verb. This means that the believer received the Spirit of the Living God at a definite point in time—and the time when the Spirit was given was when the believer was saved.

⁷ "Zimbabwe: On the day Cecil died..." August 04, 2015, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2015/08/04/zimbabwe-on-day-cecil-died.html>, accessed 27 September 2016

Do you recall the promise delivered by Peter? The wounded people cried out, “Brothers, what shall we do” [ACTS 2:37b]? Peter, together with the other 119 disciples who had gathered in the upper room, had just declared those who crucified the Christ guilty, even as he announced the reason Jesus had offered His life as a sacrifice. The knowledge that they had rejected God’s mercy and grace filled those listening with fear, compelling them to cry out for mercy. Peter’s response pronounced the remedy for sin: “Repent and be baptised every one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” [ACTS 2:28].

“You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Many scholars understand that Peter was speaking of the Spirit of God as the divine gift that accompanies salvation. Some modern translations make this truth clear: “You will receive the Holy Spirit as a gift”⁸; “You will receive God’s gift, the Holy Spirit.”⁹ At the moment of salvation, each Christian receives the Holy Spirit who thereafter lives within the child of God. Consequently, because the Spirit of God lives within the child of God, that child no longer need be controlled by the things of this world.

It is important to note that Paul is focused on the results of the presence of the Spirit of God in the life of the believer. This is the reason that the word “spirit” occurs with a lower case “s.” However, he is obviously speaking of the Holy Spirit because he has just urged Timothy to “fan into flame the gift of God.” The connection of “gift” and “Spirit” in verses six and seven almost universally point to the Holy Spirit. In the fourteenth verse in this chapter, the Apostle has written, “By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” [2 TIMOTHY 1:14]. The fact that he concludes this passage with a focus on the Spirit of God would mean that he is ending where he began—with a focus on the Holy Spirit.

Focus on the fact that God has given His Spirit to all who are in Christ Jesus. On one occasion when He was teaching His disciples, Jesus challenged them to think beyond the box. “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit” [LUKE 11:13]! If we accept that we are fallen creatures, unclean in the sight of God even though we are forgiven, and if we accept that even in our broken condition we give good gifts to our children, then why should anyone think it strange that the Father gives His best gift of all to those who receive His salvation? God gives His Holy Spirit to those who are His children!

The Apostles had been arrested by the religious leaders. However, God released them and ordered them to declare His message in the Temple. Haled before the Council, Peter, speaking for all the Apostles, testified, “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging Him on a tree. God exalted Him at His right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and *so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him*” [ACTS 5:29-32]. Peter asserts that the Spirit of God is given to those who are obedient to God. Obeying His command to repent and believe, believers receive the Spirit of God.

In what is arguably the earliest letter written by the Apostle to have been included in the canon of Scripture, Paul warned those who read his warning to be holy, especially avoiding sexual immorality. Then, he warned, “Whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, *who gives his Holy Spirit to you*” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:8]. God gives His Holy Spirit to those who are called by the Name of His Son. This alone is sufficient reason for us to be holy!

⁸ **God’s Word Translation** (Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, MI 1995); **International Standard Version** (ISV Foundation, Yorba Linda, CA 2011)

⁹ **The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation, 2nd ed.** (American Bible Society, New York, NY 1992)

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Later, in the letter we have received as the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote, “Because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may **give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him**” [EPHESIANS 1:15-17]. Though these saints had the Spirit of God living within, the Apostle nevertheless prays that the divine presence will be emphatically realised through wisdom and knowledge of God Himself. The gift of God to believers is the Spirit of God living within. The gift of God to the community of the faithful is the Spirit of God at work in their midst.

Permit me to appeal to one final Scripture that speaks of God giving His Spirit to His people. Listen carefully to what the Apostle has written to the Christians united in Rome. “Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts **through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us**” [ROMANS 5:1-5]. Focus on that fifth verse: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

There are good people who read the text and believe that Paul was speaking only of those in leadership as having received this spirit of power and love and self-control. Appealing to the whole of Scripture, and especially to Paul’s letters, to me it seems best to understand that he is arguing that each Christian, each believer, has received this Spirit of Whom He writes. Having received this Holy Spirit, Christians are equipped, and expected, to live lives characterised by power and love and self-control. If you are a Christian, God has given you His Holy Spirit. God Himself lives within each Christian.

This is a mystery, but I do not wish anyone to miss the importance of what is written. The Christian resting in the Risen Lord, obedient to Him and dependent upon His power, is granted divine ability to communicate as Christ promised. Preparing His disciples for His exodus, Jesus taught them, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for **he dwells with you and will be in you**” [JOHN 14:15-17].

Soon after saying this, Jesus promised, “When the Helper comes, **whom I will send to you from the Father**, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me” [JOHN 15:26]. Note that the Spirit is to be sent to those who follow Jesus.

Now, listen to a final promise from the Master to His disciples. “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, **I will send him to you**. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged” [JOHN 16:7-11].

The Spirit will “convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.” Believers resting in Christ Jesus will witness the Spirit at work in their lives. The Holy Spirit speaking through the Christian is at work convicting the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement. The Christian is infused with supernatural power to convict the world of sin. That child of God will not need to be “preachy,” she will live a holy life and her life will be used by the Spirit to convict; and when unbelievers ask the reason for her Faith, she will tell them.

A practical example of that convicting work through a servant of the Son of God is provided in something Paul wrote. “I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 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 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5].

We do not argue people into God’s Kingdom; rather, the Spirit convicts sinners through us. We are holy instruments that God employs to the praise of His glory. We are conduits for divine power gushing out as the Spirit works through us. As we faithfully deliver the call of God that people must repent and believe, our words are given power through holy and godly lives; and the divine Spirit works to convict and call lost people to life through us. God has given this Spirit to each person who looks to Him in faith. The Spirit of God lives in us, working powerfully so that each Christian becomes a worker together with God.

THE GENESIS OF FEAR — “God gave us a spirit not of fear.” Neglect of God’s gift produces a spirit of fear which is identified with this dying world. “No fear” was the logo for an American lifestyle clothing brand. The motto is still seen on the back window of pickups driven by many young men and on moto-cross clothing. Many took it to mean that youth were fearless. Tragically, nothing could have been farther from the truth. Fear is very much a part of this dying world, even for the young. The only people who truly live without fear are Christians who are secure in the knowledge that they are loved by God who has received them in His Beloved Son.

That this is the case is made evident when the Apostle reminds believers, “You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” [ROMANS 8:15]! God did not give us a spirit that devolves into fear and timidity. Fear marks those seeking to please the world; fear characterises the individual who has taken his eyes off Jesus.

An example of the consequences of taking our eyes off the Master is provided by Peter. Peter is a favourite foil for preachers seeking to illustrate faith and impetuosity. You will undoubtedly recall one account involving Peter which is provided in the Synoptic Gospels. I am referring to the account detailing how Jesus came walking on the water even as the disciples were being buffeted by waves. Let’s allow Matthew to take up the story for us at this point. “Immediately [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowds. And after He had dismissed the crowds, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, ‘It is a ghost!’ and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.’” If they had been looking for Him, they would not have been afraid!

“And Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.’ He said, ‘Come.’ So, Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, ‘Lord, save me.’ Jesus immediately reached out His hand and took hold of him, saying to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’ And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped Him, saying, ‘Truly, You are the Son of God!’” [MATTHEW 14:22-33].

On many occasions, Christians will have heard multiple lessons to be drawn from this account. However, the truth I ask you to focus on today is to see that fear is the consequence of ceasing to look to the Master. The account informs us that when Peter began to look at the wind, fear replaced faith. Matthew wrote, “When he saw the wind, he was afraid” [MATTHEW 14:30a]. So long as Peter kept his eye on the Master, he would do what Jesus had called him to do; when he began to look at the conditions around him, he began to sink. Fear and faith are incompatible.

Churches are notorious for beginning in faith and with time resorting to their own devices. I don’t mean to imply that Christians should not use reason; I do mean that when a congregation, or an individual Christian, has determined the will of God, His will is what must be done. Services are initiated with men and women of faith willing to invest time in prayer, seeking the will of God. God blesses by answering their prayers and giving them unity to advance as He leads them in a particular direction. These saints boldly advance and the congregation grows and the cause of Christ prospers.

As the congregation grows, imperceptibly the people begin to shift their attitude from fulfilling the will of the Master to conserving what they have already achieved. Maintaining the building, keeping the community’s approval and getting bigger crowds become more important than doing the will of God. When this happens, and it is almost inevitable that it will happen, the tendency is for the assembly to begin to fear venturing out of what is familiar and away from what is now viewed as “safe.” Safety takes precedence over boldness. New efforts at advancing the cause of Christ frighten the members—they fear that donations will dry up, that unbelievers might complain that the church has become unloving or that the crowds will dwindle. At that precise moment, the congregation reveals that it has ceased walking in the Spirit and is instead relying on their own ingenuity, their own wisdom, their own strength.

Some years ago, David Wilkerson charged in a sermon, “I look at the whole religious scene today and all I see are inventions and ministries of man and flesh.”¹⁰ He continued by stating that the world is impacting the church rather than the church impacting the world. Then, He gave specifics—music and entertainment taking over the house of God, hatred of correction and reproof and a failure of the heart of Christians beating in synchrony with the heart of God. What he witnessed more than a decade past seems to be even truer today.

It seems that professing Christians are more concerned with personal comfort than with seeking and doing the will of God. The churches appear fearful of vigorously advancing the cause of Christ—we are more concerned with being liked than we are with being godly. We design our worship to appeal to the flesh rather than being times of worship of the Living God. The world now dictates how we will conduct our services. It is not that unbelievers demand that we act in a particular way, but in our fear that we might offend we avoid demanding holiness.

If the preacher delivers a powerful message in the Spirit of God, the response of God’s people reminds me of a firework display. I don’t mean that we light up beautifully or that we are motivated to attempt great things for God’s sake. I mean that we appear to move wonderfully and immediately, but if our resolve consists only of noise and a brilliant flash—there is no lasting impact of the decisions we say we make. Even before the people have left the church building, those who said they were making decisions for Christ are already considering the push-back they know is coming from the world, and they grow fearful. Afraid of man, they urge caution.

¹⁰ David Wilkerson, “A Call to Anguish,” (sermon preached 9/15/2002), Text Sermon, http://img.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/article_pdf.php?aid=32622; Audio Sermon, http://www.tscnyc.org/media_center.php?pg=sermons&mi=29; Video Sermon, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayYizi9TZAQ>; all accessed 12 November 2016

God, speaking through His Apostle, has informed the people of God, “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God” [1 CORINTHIANS 2:12]. If the spirit of this age leads to fear, then we need to understand that such fear is not from God. Christians must rebuke the fearful with all the vehemence any spiritual interloper deserves. When fellow Christians counsel us to be cautious, to avoid upsetting the world, to wait until we have everything in hand, we need to speak to them firmly, reminding them that they are embracing and espousing the spirit of this dying age.

When we excuse our disobedience, when we blame another for our failure, we need to realise that we have succumbed to the spirit of this dying age. It is so natural for Christians to slip back into this attitude because that is where we once lived. Perhaps you will remember these pointed words from the Apostle to the Gentiles. “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” [EPHESIANS 2:1-3]. It is the spirit of the wicked one who is at work in the sons of disobedience; and when we act as though this dying world had authority over us and over the work to which we have been appointed, it is because we have surrendered to the evil one.

MARKS OF THE SPIRIT — “God gave us a spirit ... of power and love and self-control.” Wherever the Spirit of God reigns, we will witness power, love and self control. We witness this transformation of life because the Spirit within us is God’s Spirit. Therefore, the human spirit becomes so closely identified with the Spirit of Christ that it is as though Christ stood before the world. The Christian controlled by the Spirit of God reveals the Son of God through her life or through his life because Christ is working in that person’s life.

Just as individual Christians controlled by the Spirit of God are characterised by power, love and self-control, so congregations ruled by the Holy Spirit are likewise marked by power, love and self-control. When these marks characterise a congregation, you know that God’s Spirit controls the Body and that He is working freely among the saints in that assembly. We might rightly ask what these divine characteristics look like. How would we recognise the individual controlled by the Spirit of God? How will we recognise the congregation controlled by the Holy Spirit? If I am moved at the direction of the Spirit of God, what will my life look like?

Since power is listed first, let me speak about this power that God has given His people by asking you to hear again the prayer that the Apostle included early in the Ephesian Encyclical. The Apostle wrote, “Because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of 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 power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church” [EPHESIANS 1:15-22].

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Think of that! The power God has entrusted to us as His beloved people is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. It is that identical divine power that exalted our Saviour to the highest throne in the heavenly places. I'm talking about that glorious power that has raised the Son of God above all rule and authority and power and dominion. The power that is available to each child of God is the power that has given Christ our Lord the Name above everything that is named. This is the power that is at work in the believer. The power with which we are entrusted is the same power that has glorified the Master. That power is present because the Spirit of God lives in us.

I am tired, and you should be tired, of the excuses we make for failure. "I can't conquer my sinful desires. I just keep on doing what I know is wrong. I can't help myself." Really? You have the power of God at work in your life and you can't help yourself? Claim God's power to live a holy life. Go to those whom you've wronged through your sinful choices and ask their forgiveness. If they are Christians, they will forgive you and join you in prayer to claim the power of God.

"My children are unsaved; they are going to hell. They don't love God and they won't listen to me. I just hope it somehow works out." You don't practise prevailing prayer? You aren't willing to fast and pray? What power did you receive from God? You don't pray with your children because you are afraid you will drive them away? Your cowardice will assuredly drive them far from you!

Listen to a parable Jesus told about a persistent widow and a stern judge. Jesus taught, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth'" [LUKE 18:2-8]? If God promises justice, do you imagine He will not give you His answer? He has given you His power!

"I don't have time to speak with my work mates about their salvation. I don't want to offend my neighbours by asking about their relationship to Christ." Where is the power that God has given to each Christian? Is it because you have allowed the world to invade your life and you are now more like you were before you believed than at any other time since?

"We won't ever see revival as witnessed in past generations; the world is too wicked." According to the Word of God, it was "while we were still weak" that "Christ died for the ungodly" [ROMANS 5:6]. Surely we have read that "God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" [ROMANS 5:8].

"The world will only get worse and worse as the end of the age draws near. We won't see people come to faith any longer." Perhaps the message of life has been rewritten and this verse should be removed from our Bible: "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" [ROMANS 5:20b]. If you have the Spirit of God living in you, shouldn't you expect grace to be abounding through your life as you boldly testify of Christ the Lord?

And just as the individual ruled by the Spirit of God has divine power to "destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" [see 2 CORINTHIANS 10:5], so the congregation ruled by the Holy Spirit will demonstrate God's marvellous power to accomplish great things for Christ's sake.

God has given us His Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord resides, His power is found. And just as His power is demonstrated among those over whom He reigns, so the love of God prevails where the Spirit of God resides. The cowardice that marks the course of this dying world shrinks from bold rebuke; however, the love of God will lead us to sacrifice reputation, security and all that belongs to self as we endeavour to fulfil the will of the Living God. It should come as no surprise that love characterises the individual or the congregation that is ruled by the Spirit of God. After all, the first named “fruit of the Spirit” is love [see GALATIANS 5:22].

The man who insists on getting his own way, refusing to show mercy or compassion, is an individual demonstrating the cowardice identified with this dying world. That man is puffed up, imagining that he is strong, when in fact he is cowardly, petty, fearful of walking as Christ walks. Such a one needs to humble himself under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time God may exalt that proud person [see 1 PETER 5:6]. The self-important, haughty, overweening woman shows that she is ignorant of the love of God. Such a one needs to hear the plea delivered by the Apostle. “I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together ... in your prayers to God” [ROMANS 15:30].

Paul’s plea to the Romans was iterated in his missive to the congregation in Philippi when he wrote, “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” [PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11].

In order to focus on the love revealed in the Spirit-controlled individual I will point to something John has written. He wrote, “There is no fear in love, but *perfect love casts out fear*. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because He first loved us” [1 JOHN 4:18, 19]. If we are controlled by the Spirit and the first fruit of the Spirit is love, then we will not be cowardly or fearful since *perfect love casts out fear*!

The Spirit-controlled individual, and consequently, the Spirit-controlled congregation, is characterised by self-control. This concept of self-control implies that the one controlled by the Spirit of God instills soundness of mind in others. The self-controlled individual will be modest in dress and deportment so as not to detract from the power and love of God. Rather than being self-indulgent, the self-controlled individual rules over her own heart. Self-controlled individuals show good judgement.

It should not be surprising to learn that self-control is a characteristic demanded of those who serve as elders. An elder must be self-controlled [see 1 TIMOTHY 3:2]. The self-controlled individual moves deliberately, always careful to build, to encourage and to comfort. He does not fly off the handle, acting precipitously and in choler; he will not allow himself to be put in the position that pride will keep him from confessing error. The Spirit-controlled Christian must be strong, efficient, courageous, but never forgetting personal tenderness for others. She must control her own temper.

2 TIMOTHY 1:7
WHO CAN WE BLAME?

Shall we blame our circumstances when we fail to follow Christ? Shall we blame the pastor, or the deacons, or our fellow saints when we cease to do right and honour God? If we are ruled by the Spirit, we do not surrender to the craven spirit of this dying age; rather, we seize the force of character supplied by the presence of God's Holy Spirit to refuse to kneel before the attitude of the world. Instead of softness which marks those in love with this present world, we will express love, when we are filled with the Spirit. If Christ's Spirit reigns in our lives, rather than being self-indulgent we will be self-disciplined.

Let me speak a personal word to you who listen today. The time is short—Christ is coming soon. The days are evil—the churches have invited the world into the sanctuary of God. Christians are almost indistinguishable from the fallen in this evil day. I don't know if we are even able to bestir ourselves at this late hour. Nevertheless, I must call the people of God to repentance, choosing to be holy. It is time for us to live lives marked by power and love and self-control. I do not call on the denizens of this dying world to change—they cannot change! I do call on the people of God to be ruled by the Spirit of God. When we are so ruled, we will shine like the brightness of the sky above. As we do the will of God, there is no question but that we will turn many to righteousness and shine like the stars forever and ever.

If we fail to live holy lives, who can we blame? If we refuse to be controlled by the Spirit, who is at fault? We cannot blame God, for He gives us His Spirit; and where His Spirit reigns, the spirit of man is marked by power and love and self-control. If I do not see these qualities in my life, I can blame no one but myself. If our congregation is not marked by these characteristics, we can blame no one but ourselves. God has done His part. Now, we are responsible to honour Him. I long for God's people to be distinguished by the presence of the Holy Spirit of God. This is my plea to the people of God. This is my prayer for us today. Amen.