

The Rev. Charlie Holt:

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do give you praise and thanksgiving for the gift of your word. As you said to Timothy, it is inspired. It's God-breathed. And so, we ask that you would breathe that inspiration into our brains, into our minds, into our hearts, so that we have the illumination to understand it and apply it to our lives for your glory and namesake. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

We've been working through a series on what does it mean to be Spirit-filled. And if you're just joining us for the first time this Sunday, we've looked at how the Holy Spirit equips us and gives us His fruit, how we're baptized in the Spirit. And essentially, we want to get the Spirit of the living God into our lives and into our hearts. And so today we're going to be reflecting on what does it mean to be empowered by the Holy Spirit of God. God wants to give us His power. There are prayers in the Scriptures where we ask God to fill us with His power to give us an awareness and understanding of the power of God in our lives.

And so, we're going to look at empowerment from three different ways. One is the empowerment that is from within, the empowerment to endure, and the empowerment that comes from the breath of God in the Scriptures and for mission, for gospel ministry in the world.

And let's first think about this idea of being empowered from within.

One of the great arguments of the Bible, and particularly the Old Testament, is that we actually are powerless in and of ourselves. And we're powerless particularly to something called sin and the sin nature.

Remember from Adam and Eve where they disobeyed God and fell into sin by falling for Satan's lies and temptations, partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which they were specifically told by God not to eat, and yet they did. And so, on one level we can think of sin as a breaking of God's commandments. And that's not a bad definition for sin, it's a type of willful choosing of rebellion against God's ways, His will, His commandments.

But sin is also described in the Scriptures as being a condition, not unlike a chronic disease or a genetic disorder.

It is something that is innate within us that we are powerless over in and of ourselves.

And the Old Testament is really making the case for this.

So, through the book of Genesis, for example, you see this thread of the consequences of the fall and how sin is passed on from generation to generation. We always have this debate. Is it nature or is it nurture, right? I've heard that before. Is this something that the sin condition is something that is caused by the corrupt environment in which these people are living, or is it something that is just innate within the nature?

And it gets so bad in the book of Genesis that one solution that is given is

to take the human race down to one family and start over. In other words, get rid of all the bad people,

so, we're gonna get rid of this corrupt environment of corruption in the human race, and we're gonna bring it down to the one righteous person, Noah. You know the story of the flood, right?

But the problem was, Noah carried the problem. That even though you could bring the entire race down to one,

you still had the problem being passed on innately from within Noah's personhood and into his children, and the sins start happening immediately

after Noah comes off the ark.

Why? Because it's innate within us. And so, then the scriptures begin to say, well, what kind of solutions can we put towards this problem? Are there things that can be brought to bear to solve the problem of human sin? And so, the solutions that the scriptures provide and show us are, well, maybe what they need is a law. You know, so we'll provide structure and rules. They

just, it's ignorance. They don't know what to do. So, we'll just give them some guidelines and some ways of living.

That'll solve the problem. Didn't work.

Well, maybe what they need is government. They just need a leader. They need somebody to hold them accountable. And so, let's give them a king.

Did that work?

No. See, we're making the case of the Old Testament.

And you get to the prophets, and we get to our passage for today, but even before that, the prophet Jeremiah, he comes to the withering diagnosis and conclusion about the problem of human sin.

And it's in this statement. He says, "The heart of man is wicked and deceitful above all things.

Who can fathom it?"

Now that doesn't sound very good, does it?

And this is one of our problems as human beings is that we always want to say of ourselves, well, we're not that bad.

We're not totally deprived. We don't have that bad of a human nature. And I think all of us recognize that we're made in the image of God and we're capable of incredibly good things as well. But there's still that human dilemma, that human problem of human sin, that condition. And theologians have debated over the decades and over the millennia. And philosophers as well, this idea of whether our natures are fully enslaved to sin or only mostly enslaved to sin or partially. Can human nature be perfected?

And what the teaching of scriptures is, is that in and of ourselves, human beings are in bondage to sin. We are enslaved to sin. We are dead in our sins.

Not mostly dead from the princess bride, but all dead.

And so, listen, this is actually the teaching of the Anglican church.

I don't know if you ever, during sermons when they get a little dull, do you ever pull out the prayer book and start flipping through the historic documents in the back of the prayer book? Does anybody ever do that? You wanna confess to that today?

Well, there's something in the back of the prayer book called the 39 Articles that were written by the Anglican Divines, the people who were the original theologians and leaders of the Anglican church. And article number 10 is the one that actually addresses what the Episcopal church is, the Anglican church is understanding of human nature. And it says at the top of it, article 10 says on free will.

And this is what it says. It says, "The condition of man after the fall of Adam "is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself "by his own natural strength and good works to faith "and calling upon God." In other words, we are in a bondage of the will. We are in a slavery of our will. We can't, in and of our own strength, turn and repent to God. And this is what the prophet Jeremiah is making the case for. And what he says is, is that the real solution that needs to happen is actually an empowerment

that will come from within.

An empowerment that will come when the Holy Spirit of the living God takes our heart of stone and our heart of death and our heart of bondage

and literally transforms it from the inside out by his regenerative power to actually

do what God wants us to do.

Listen to the way Jeremiah puts it. This is Jeremiah 31, verse 33, that's in your bulletin. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days declares the Lord. I will put my law within them,

and I will write it on their hearts.

And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer each one teaches neighbor, each his brother saying, "Know the Lord, "for they shall all know me from the least "to the greatest," declares the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sins no more.

Paul picks up on this theme in his letter to the Romans when he's describing the bondage of human sin in that famous passage in Romans chapter seven, where he says, "Why do I do the things I do? "I wanna do what's right, but the evil I don't wanna do, "this is what I keep on doing." Has anybody ever related to Paul's wrestle with sin? Where you know the right thing to do, you know what you wanna do, he's talking about covetousness is the particular commandment that he's wrestling with, which I can imagine as a single guy, Paul, as he's going around to these various cities and churches and he's a tent maker, he's living hand to mouth, making his own living and I'm sure that Paul looked at some of these wealthy people and people that had their wives and their children and their families and he might have said to himself in weaker moments, "Boy, I really would like that.

"I really would like a wife like that guy has. "I really would like the stuff that that person has. "I want a house like that. "I'd like to have the creature comforts. "I'd like to be able to travel to Spain "like some of these people can."

You know, Paul in his brain probably constantly and in his heart constantly struggled with the issue of covetousness and when Paul begins to contemplate that and he knows the commandment, and he says and the commandment comes and it actually makes things worse

because here now I know this external rule, this law of God which my brain says, yeah, that's right but internally I can't seem to follow it and so now I feel condemned because I want to do what's right but the evil that I don't want to do, that's what I keep on doing and so Paul, he cries out and this is the point.

He cries out because he is powerless over sin

and he says, "Who will rescue me "from this body of sin and death?" And he says, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ. "There's now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." This is Jeremiah 31 saying, "The Lord has forgiven me of my sins through the cross."

And what the law, meaning the law of Moses was powerless to do with the do not do this, do not do that, do not do that, that law was powerless to actually change his heart.

All it could do was restrain the evil, it could give you the guidelines, it could actually make you feel condemned, but it didn't really do anything to address the true heart of the matter. It's kind of like treating the symptoms rather than the core of the disease.

He says, "What the law was powerless to do, "God has done by giving the gift of his Holy Spirit."

And Paul in Romans eight, he says it this way, I'll read some of this to you. He says, "Those who live according to the flesh "set their minds on the things of the flesh, "but those who live according to the Spirit "set their minds on the things of the Spirit. "To set the mind on the flesh is death, "but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God. It doesn't submit to God's law, indeed it can't, it doesn't have the ability to submit to God's law. It's in bondage, it's in slavery, it's dead. That's the problem of the flesh nature. But those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ doesn't belong to him, but if Christ is in you, even though the body's dead because of sin, the Spirit is alive because of righteousness. And the same Spirit that raised Jesus Christ from the dead

dwells in you, well then, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to you.

In other words, what we desperately need is an empowerment that comes from within from the outpouring gift of the Holy Spirit of God. What does it mean to live the Spirit-filled life? Well, that's really it in a nutshell, isn't it? God's power is coursing through my being because I'm living in the Spirit and not living in the flesh.

One is death, one is life. It's really that much of a contrast. One is powerless, a bondage is slavery, one is freedom. So, is there free will? Well, the answer to that question is it depends.

If we don't have the Spirit of God, if the Spirit is not living within us, then no, there's no free will.

Our choices will be governed by our will,

and that will is in bondage to slavery and to sin, and so we will consistently, not always, but consistently make choices that are not in following and keeping with the lordship of Christ and with God because our wills are enslaved.

But once we have Christ, the prison gates are opened, and our will can please the Lord and has the freedom to choose life that we might live. And so, on one hand, there's no free will on another. There is for those who walk in the Spirit. Now, that doesn't mean that we will always choose to follow the Lord because there still is an aspect of the sin nature, and that's the internal battle that we will fight until we're glorified.

So, the first is the inward empowerment. But then let's think about the empowerment for endurance,

that we all have things in our life that are overwhelming to us, not just our sin nature, but the challenges of living in a sinful and broken and fallen world with evil and suffering and the various adversaries that begall our souls.

And so, Jesus tells this story to His disciples in order to encourage them to pray. This is what He says. He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. So here we're getting to the practical

mechanism of how we receive the power of God. One is to pray, and then the second is to breathe in the Word of God through the Scriptures, engagement with the Scriptures. Those are the two ways that we are empowered by the Spirit is through asking God for His power, prayer, and filling ourselves in that engagement with the Word of God. But let's start with the prayer piece. He tells him this parable to pray, not lose heart, and he describes this judge who is a bit of a jerk.

He doesn't fear God, it describes, and he doesn't respect or care about people.

In other words, this is a very self-centered, corrupt judge.

And then the other character in the parable is a widow.

Now why a widow? Because she's powerless.

She doesn't have a husband to fight her battles against this adversary. We don't know what the adversary is, it's just described as an adversary, but she needs help. She needs somebody to plead her cause, to take her case, and to fight the battle for her because she's overwhelmed.

She is powerless against this adversarial authority. And so, what does she do? She pesters this unjust judge,

banging on his door at night, or I don't know what she was doing, but she was relentless, apparently.

I kind of always think of St. Augustine's mother, Monica, when I always think about this woman who was so persistent in her prayers that she would always go to the priest and anybody that would hear her. She goes, "Would you just help me pray for my son, "her son Augustine, who was not a saint "when she was praying for him? "He was a wild kid who was off doing bad stuff "and chasing wild women and all kinds of things."

And so, Monica was very worried about him and very worried about his salvation in his soul. Have you ever had any kids that you've been worried about?

And there's nothing more desperate

and a sense of powerlessness than when your kids are going in the wrong direction. That's really a hopeless feeling as a parent. And that's the way Monica was feeling. One of the priests, he said to her, "Ma'am, if you are as persistent with God in your prayers "as you are with me, there's no chance in hell "that your son's not gonna become a Christian."

(Laughing) He doesn't have a chance. You are one persistent prayer. And that's why Monica's been sainted, actually. She's now a saint Monica because she, in her prayers, was advocating for St. Augustine, who became one of the great theologians of the church. Anyway, here is this woman who is powerless from a worldly standpoint. And she's dealing with corrupt worldly authorities, but yet these corrupt worldly authorities still give her what she's asking for and still help her deal with her adversary because of her persistence in asking.

And what the Lord says is,

I know that all of you as my disciples are facing things that can cause you to lose heart. And we are all like that widow. We are all facing adversities and difficulties and challenges in our life that are beyond our control,

that make us wonder whether we should just give up and quit and throw in the towel because this is too hard, this is too difficult, this is beyond my abilities.

And what the Lord is saying to us is, yes, it is beyond your abilities.

It's beyond your control; it's beyond your power.

But you need to ask me for help in those moments. You need to be like that persistent widow that bangs down the doors of heaven because the power is not in yourself

to help yourself.

You're not going to be able to pull yourself up by the bootstraps in this situation.

You're gonna need a power outside of yourself.

And guess what?

If that unjust judge who doesn't care about God, doesn't care about people is willing because of her persistence, well, how much more a God who actually loves you,

who considers you one of His chosen ones

and His beloved wants to come and bring justice to those who are crying out in despair for Him.

And so, we need the empowerment of the Lord in His Spirit because this world is a challenge and this is difficulty. Not over to just overcome our sin, but to overcome the world because greater is the one that is within you than the one who is in this world. And that brings us to the third empowerment that comes from the work of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures themselves.

Now Paul is thinking to his young protege, Timothy, and he's saying, "I'm about to die, "and I'm passing on the faith," which he calls a good deposit to Timothy. He's passing on the Holy Spirit and he's passing on the Scriptures in the gospel to Timothy, and he's saying, "I need you to pick up the torch "and to carry the ball now, Timothy."

And he says, "But it's not me that you need in your life. "What you need and what you have been given is God's Word."

That's the torch.

And he puts it this way. He says, "All Scripture is inspired by God." That's an onomatopoeia. The Greek word is pneuma, theonuma, which means God breathed.

Remember when Adam and Eve were formed and God kind of pulled the dust of the ground together, and then it says, "He breathed into them "and they came to life?" That's the Spirit of God, the breath of God.

Well, that's what is in the Bible.

These are, this Word is God breathed.

It is inspired.

It's an onomatopoeia because it sounds like it said, you know, respirate, inspiration, pneuma, rua, all the words for breath, spirit, wind, they're all the same. They're all onomatopoeias. It's really fascinating.

But what the Lord is saying is that the God has taken His Spirit and He has empowered His Word. That's why the Scriptures describe the Bible as living and active. And He says, "All of the Scriptures,"

I know there are people fashionably today that would like to pick and choose like Thomas Jefferson and cut out the ones you don't like,

but all Scripture is God breathed and profitable for teaching, for repute, for correction, for training in righteousness so that the man of God, or we'll make it politically correct, the woman of God, either one may be complete, equipped for every good work.

I'll end with this illustration from the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was called the son of man in this section, Ezekiel, and he's taken out into this valley.

And there are dry bones. They're scattered all over the valley.

And the angel of the Lord says to Ezekiel, he says, "Son of man, do you see these bones?

Can these bones live?"

Now, whenever an angel of the Lord asks you a question, do what Ezekiel did.

You punt it right back to the angel of the Lord because he's always asking you a question to teach you something. Can these bones live? Ezekiel says, "You tell me, only you know, Lord."

He says, "Son of man, this is what I want you to do. I want you to prophesy to the bones

and tell them, hear the word of the Lord."

And so, Ezekiel has to start preaching and proclaiming the word of God to the dead bones.

Now, that's a picture of what Paul is talking about in his letter to Timothy, that the word of God is God-breathed. It is powerful for taking that which is dead and making it alive.

And so, as Ezekiel starts to just preach to dead people, I actually did this at a grapeside service for a Jewish man in Lake Mary, Florida. I was in the cemetery. His widow was a member of my church, and she asked me to do the grapeside. And I was trying to think of an Old Testament passage. It was about resurrection. And so, I preached on the Ezekiel preaching to dead bones in a cemetery. It was one of my most glorious moments I've ever had. I was so excited to be able to do that. But Ezekiel's prophesying telling these bones, "Hear the word of the Lord." And all of a sudden, the ankle bone gets connected to the shin bone. And the shin bone to the knee bone and the knee bone You know that song saying, "Hear the word of the Lord." Dead bones. That's a great song.

It comes from that story.

And Ezekiel sees these bones coming together in sinews and muscles and flesh. And all of a sudden, they are assembled as human beings on the ground, fully en fleshed by the word of God. And yet they are still without life. And he says, "I now need you to pray," Ezekiel, "to God again and prophesy to God and say, "'Breathe on these slain.'" In other words, "Take your Holy Spirit and pour out your Holy Spirit onto these people."

And so, Ezekiel prays like the persistent widow. And he prays and he says, "Lord, blow on these slain." And the Spirit of God fills them and gives them life, and they stand on their feet like a vast army.

And then the angel of the Lord says these words to Ezekiel. He says, "Ezekiel, this is the whole house of God. They say our hope is gone, our strength is dried up." In other words, when they look at themselves, they see death, powerlessness, and hopelessness. He says, "But there is hope in the power of God's word

and in the power of the Holy Spirit of the living God. And so, prophesy to the bones and prophesy to the breath and ask God to fill His people with His Holy Spirit. And when that happens, they will be, as Paul says to Timothy, "Thoroughly equipped and complete to do whatever mission work and gospel proclamation that the Lord needs His church and His people to do." I mean, this vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones is a vision of the empowerment that comes through the resurrected life and the power that raised Jesus from the dead, that same power that God is pouring out in His people through the gift of His word and His Holy Spirit to our lives even today, if we will ask for it.