

Meet the Holy Spirit

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[0 : 00] If you were told you could meet anyone, who would it be?

! Sorry, I can't help but embarrass Emily and say what she said.! If Emily could meet anybody in history, she said Paddington Bear.

Probably, probably many people, Christian or not, would probably say Jesus.

Imagine if you could rewind to the right moment in history and place in the world where Jesus, in his earthly ministry, was.

I want to suggest to you that it would be actually very, very difficult to meet him close up, face to face.

[1 : 13] And the reason I say that is that pretty much most of what we read about him, he was surrounded by lots of people. Imagine standing there in that crowd.

Someone comes around and gives you some fish and some bread. Thanks very much. Someone comes along later with a basket. And they're off in the distance.

You see the guy that it's all happening around. And he says, can you get up close? No chance.

Everybody gathered, listening to hear what he's got to say.

There's so many of them. Pushes himself in a boat out to sea so that he can face the multitudes.

And Zacchaeus hears that Jesus is coming through that town. The only way in which he thinks he just might get a glimpse is to climb up a tree and see over the crowds.

[2 : 32] The woman who's been hemorrhaging for years and tried every last thing, spent every last shekel on some kind of medical cure. If only, she says to herself, if only as she pushes her way through the crowd, I can just touch the hem of his garment, then I may be healed.

Of course she was. Or the guy on the stretcher who was carried by his friends up onto the roof of the house, and they had to make a hole in the roof of the house, because that's the only way they could get close up to him.

I think it's really important that we understand this, that even for those that had that privilege, that autumn blessing, of being around at the same time and place in history, to meet the living God in human form, it would have been extremely difficult to have got up close to him.

You'd have to stand in line. But Jesus says in these words that when he will return to his Father, the Holy Spirit will come.

And the Holy Spirit, by the Holy Spirit and through the Holy Spirit, anybody, anywhere, can meet God in the most intimate and personal and real and meaningful way, and you haven't got to stand in line.

[4 : 17] And yet it's that awesome truth that gets overlooked over and over and over again. That it doesn't matter how many people there are in this world reaching out to God in prayer at the same time, he is there for each and every one of us in that living, dynamic way that you can meet with him.

When I was 12 years old, I went with our youth group to a meeting that was a group of churches together on the Isle of Wight where I grew up.

And there was this little theatre that had been hired by the local churches. And a guy came to speak.

I don't remember a word of what he said. I do remember feeling very bored and uncomfortable in this really uncomfortable chair as I sat and he seemed to talk and talk and talk and talk.

Then the music group started to play and said we're going to have a time of sung worship. I like the music. But what happened next was something that I'd never experienced before.

[5 : 42] The church that I grew up in was quite a traditional one with an organ and pews and hymn books. And people didn't really put their hands in the air when they worship God.

But that started to happen as the music started to play. And people were singing and people were raising their arms in worship. And some people started to weep.

And then others started to, as we were worshipping, say some words which sounded like another language. And then other people began to, it seemed to be falling over.

I thought, are they fainting? Are they passing out? And afterwards our youth leader explained to us that what we were seeing was the Holy Spirit as people were encountering the presence of God. In a way that I hadn't experienced before. I couldn't understand how people would be just crying, weeping or laughing as they were worshipping God. And the foreign language thing, it was explained to me, these were people speaking in tongues.

[6 : 51] And people being filled with a Holy Spirit that they weren't fainting, they weren't passing out. But they were being slain to the Spirit. The Holy Spirit was at work there. And I remember thinking, this was, before this had been explained, this is a really weird thing that's going on here.

What is this? And a slightly older member of the youth group began to put his arms into the air and worship. I think, oh no, what's going on? He then stretched his hand over and placed it on my head. And before I had the opportunity to object, something happened. The only way I can find to describe it is that the most awesome sense of peace and joy came upon me.

I began to weep. My hands shook. My heart was pounding so hard it felt like it was going to come out of my chest. And eventually I sat down because I knew that if I didn't, I was going to be blown off my feet.

You know, I had had no theological education whatsoever at that point in my life. And I knew very little about the Bible. And yet in the 40 odd years that's passed since that happened to me, every time I look back at it and I try to remind myself of it, I'm convinced and remain to be convinced that what I learnt on that occasion was the most important thing I've ever learnt.

[8 : 31] that God is not just an idea. God's not just a set of beliefs, a moral code, or spiritual code.

And neither is God an impersonal force. God is real. And God can be known.

And you can be known that you are known by him in the most profound, real, personal way.

And neither is it a memory that is just frozen in history sort of back in the mid 1980s that this happened then, wasn't that wonderful? Oh, I'll just revisit that memory. revisit that memory. No, what happened that evening was something that was brought to birth in me that changed everything. I didn't know then that I was going to be called into ministry.

But every time I've gone back, every time I go through a time of prayer, I'm taken back. Well, not just taken back, what happened then was the bringing to birth of something, a dimension that I believe has never left me, that when we pray, we actually connect spiritually with the author of the universe. And no matter how difficult life may be, and no matter how hard the time we might be going through, and no matter how anxious we might be feeling at a given moment, or how much full of fear we may be, or whether we're in a time of joy, or a time of grief, or a time of big decision, or whatever it may be, that connection never goes away. Not if you want that connection.

[10 : 35] And the other thing that I can't emphasize this strongly enough is that what I have just described is there for anybody and for everybody. It's a universal offer. It's an invitation to a living presence that anyone can have.

There's two books I'm going to mention this morning. One is a book that came out this year by somebody called Tyler Statton called The Familiar Stranger. It's a really practical book on the work of the Holy Spirit.

And there's just one short quotation I want to read to you. He says this, God doesn't want a team with a few star players. He wants everyone to play.

Know this, the Holy Spirit is for you as much as it is for anybody else on this earth. And my guess is, is that if you're thinking about these things, you'll be one of three types of people.

First type is you might be thinking, well, I've never really encountered the Holy Spirit. And you might be thinking, and I don't want to.

[12 : 01] Or you might be thinking, but I'm intrigued and I want to. That's the first type. The second type of person would be the person that would say, you know, I have encountered the Holy Spirit.

But for some time, I haven't. And I just wish that I could. The third type of person is, you know, yep, I'm filled with the Holy Spirit and I absolutely love it.

Whichever of those you are, I would want to say precisely the same thing. Ask God to fill you.

And don't stop asking God to fill you. Ask him to go on filling you and refilling you. When Paul talks about being filled with the Holy Spirit in Ephesians chapter 5, verse 18, he says, be filled with the Spirit.

But we lose the direct force of what he's saying there in our English translations. Because when he says be filled, he's using the present continuous.

[13:11] A more accurate translation would be, be continually filled with the Spirit. Or be being filled with the Spirit. In other words, it's not something that just happens at one moment in time and then that's it.

It's a continuous reality. And I would urge every one of us to keep pursuing it. The other book I want to mention to you this morning has been around for a little bit longer.

And it was written by somebody called Simon Ponsonby. You may have heard of him. In fact, Simon used to live in these parts of the world a while ago now.

Simon actually was a butcher. He used to live in Nailsea. And in fact, those of you who were in Clevedon long enough to remember this, he used to work in the butchers on Hill Road. He was called into ministry.

And these days he works for a big church in Oxford called St. Aldate's where he's director of theology. A number of years ago, he wrote a book called More.

[14:23] The message of that book is very profound and very simple at the same time. That wherever you're at in your journey, there's more of God's to be encountered.

And he asks the question, the theological question, how can the Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God come when we already have him? If the Spirit's already in your life, why pray?

Come, Holy Spirit. And he emphasises that to ask for more of God does not undermine the completeness of what Jesus did on the cross.

Rather, it's about drawing more deeply from that. He says this, We have everything in Christ. There is no more to be given, but there is more to be taken.

He goes on. He writes, While the Holy Spirit is a person in our lives, it is possible to live like strangers in the same house.

[15:35] Has he been with us this long, and still we do not know him? He resides in us, his temple, but we may not always be led by him, listening to him, loving him, or letting him live through us.

Instead, we lock him out of places. The Holy Spirit does not want to be a marble statue at the entrance to our souls.

He wants to fill every room. Oh, how different our lives would be. How free from anxiety, depression, jealousy, and discontent.

How full of joy and praise. How easy to pray. How quick to praise. If only we could grasp what God has done for us, given us, made us in Christ.

But we need the Spirit to take the Word of God and break through those years of lies and sin to help us truly know what he has laid up for us in our heavenly chests.

[16:50] See, what this means in practical terms is it's not about asking more from God.

It's about asking for more of God. To ask more from God would be to say, well, do this for me, Lord. Do this one other thing. Do these more things for me. Give me this or that. Make that happen. But that's not what we're talking about here. To ask for more of God is about inviting him to enter into our lives more thoroughly, completely, and deeply.

Not asking more from God, but asking for more of God. So if you sense, you know, I just wish, I wish I could have the Holy Spirit in my life, or I wish I could have more of the Holy Spirit in my life, I want to say to you right now, that's not a sign that things are problematic for you spiritually.

The very opposite. It's a sign of spiritual health when you crave for more of God.

[18:19] Which is better? You go to a really nice place to eat where the food is amazing. Is it better to turn up having already eaten and feeling quite full?

Or is it better to pitch up feeling really hungry? In his letter to Philippians, Paul says, I have learned to be content.

And what he's talking about there is he's learned to be materially content. And yet in the same letter, in the preceding chapter, he says, I press on towards the goal.

In other words, for Paul, he had learned to be materially content. Whatever material circumstances he found himself in, he had learned contentment.

But he knew how vital it was never to be spiritually content, but to keep in hot pursuit of more of God's Holy Spirit.

[19 : 29] And yet in today's Western world, we've become the opposite. We've become spiritually content whilst materially discontent.

We'll consciously or subconsciously resign ourselves to that. Well, I've got a faith. That's fine. I do that on Sundays. I might come into church once or twice a month. I made a decision for Jesus at some point.

But then we get on with investing our time and our mental energy in the stuff that really matters. Our investments, our possessions, our financial securities.

All the while, we lose sight of God's disruptive nature. If we're serious about being filled with God's Holy Spirit, we need, like Paul, to learn to be content materially, but embrace a radical discontent spiritually.

We need to become God chasers. And as we do so, we now need to be ready to lay things down and allow ourselves to be vulnerable and to trust.

[21 : 04] Many years ago, there was a weary traveller making his way through the desert. He was desperately thirsty to the point where he felt that he was so terribly dehydrated.

If he didn't drink water, then he would surely die. In the distance, he spotted a deserted cabin. It brought hope that maybe there could be water in there. He made his way up to the cabin and to his amazement, when he opened the door, he discovered an old well.

He frantically pumped at the handle of that well to draw some water, but the only thing that came out of the pump was dust. Then he noticed a tin can tied to the pump, and inside the tin can there was a note.

The note said this. Dear stranger, this pump is all right as of June 1932. I put a new sucker washer in it, and it should last for quite a few years.

[22 : 17] But the washer dries out, and the pump needs to be primed. Under the white rock, I buried a jar of water out of the sun and corked up.

There's enough water in it to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. Pour about a quarter of the water into the pump, and let us soak for a minute to wet the leather washer.

Then pour the rest medium fast and pump hard. You will have water. Have faith. This well has never run dry.

When you get watered up, fill the bottle and put it back as you found it for the next stranger who comes this way. it doesn't always feel like it at the time, but thirst is a good thing.

We need spiritual thirst. It's healthy. my prayer is that today and indeed in the time to come, we may embrace that thirst and that we won't just cling to the little that we have, but be willing to lay all things down in search of that greater thing.

[23 : 59] He wants to fill you and he wants to go on filling you. Let's pray. Lord, give us that fresh renewed sense of holy discontent.

forgive us for when we are spiritually content but materially discontent.

Lord, help us to learn to be content like Paul and help us to be spiritually restless, determined to encounter more of you in ever greater depths.

Lord, this day we ask not for more from you but more of you.

Holy Spirit, fill us afresh as we continue in our worship of you now, as we share together in communion and in this time to come.

[25 : 17] in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.