The Spirit Empowers

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[0:00] Good morning, everyone. Hope you're well. And this week has been a season of blessing for you.! I know one or two of you have been through some hard times.

! And Lord, it amazes us that what in the minds of the secular powers was complete failure.
Lord, you transformed into the most amazing opportunity for sinful human beings. Whilst we were still sinners, Paul wrote to the Romans, Christ died for us.
Lord, we're so grateful that you didn't wait till we were perfect. But Lord, while we were still sinners, you provided us with a cure for the consequences of our sin.
And Lord, we thank you that you've not left us alone to struggle in the Christian life. But as this series of sermons has reminded us, Lord, you've sent your Spirit upon your church.
[1:24] Lord, to uphold us and to strengthen us. And today, Lord, we think about how you empower us. And we thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, I was reading an article in the Harvard Business Review. And empowerment has become a buzzword of much of kind of business culture in the Western world.
It's a word that's frequently used in management seminars and in leadership seminars. It's used by identitarian groups, people who primarily identify themselves by their gender or by their sexuality, whatever, who love to talk about being empowered in this world.
And one of the sentences that really gripped my attention in this was, the writer of this article wrote, much of the talk of empowerment today is illusory.
It's promised by people who really cannot empower you, and yet promise you the earth through empowerment. I'm minded of Michelle Obama, a wonderful woman in many, many ways, and some of you will have read her best-selling book, sold 14 million copies, called Becoming.
[2:55] In that book, beautifully written book, she charts her history from South Chicago. South Chicago, South Chicago, is the only place on planet Earth where I pass the end of a road.

There's a roadside saying, if you are not a resident, it would not be wise to enter this street. It's a rough place. And she came from there, got herself a place in, I think it was Princeton University, and then she went on to do postgraduate at Harvard.
I mean, this is the cream of American education that she managed to get herself to from her very humble beginnings. I mean, as a story of hope, it really is unbeatable.
Then she came to this country, and quite a lot in the States, and went around giving lectures on empowerment. This was particularly aimed at young women and girls.
And in those lectures, I mean, this is just my opinion, you don't have to agree with it, but in those lectures, she rather painted people as victims, and then encouraged them by saying, you can be what you want to be.
[4:11] Now, you might say, well, she has some authority for saying that, given her upbringing and the outcomes in her life. I mean, she became the first lady of the most powerful nation in the world, and I think worked very well in that role.

But basically, empowerment is very simple. It means giving the authority and the power to somebody to do something, to achieve something.
So I was in the Marriott Hotel in Chicago at one time. I used to attend a conference there every year. And I got there, and I sort of, you know, I mean, this is not particularly humble, let me say, but I kind of saw myself as a regular in this hotel.
So they gave me a room. I went into my room, just flown halfway across the world, lay on the bed, and I could hear a noise like Concorde landing. So I tracked the genesis of this loud noise.
It was the ice machine, which was right outside my door. So I shot down to the desk, and there's a young woman there. I said to her, I can't stay in their room.

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[5:32] It's too noisy. She goes, well, we don't have many rooms left, sir, you know, available at your grade. I would have put down. So I said to her, please, can you not help me?

She goes, out comes a key. I go, and she's given me a suite. And I thought to myself, this is amazing.
So I went to see the manager that handles group travel in the hotel, and I told him what she'd done.
He said, yeah, he said, every week we talk to our staff about empowerment.
He said, we give them the authority to make decisions that will best help our customers have a good experience when they stay here, and there are no questions asked.
I said, if I'd known that, I would have asked for the presidential suite. So just by way of introduction, this word empowerment, and thank God we have the Holy Spirit, is about being given the authority.
[6:45] Matthew 28, Jesus said, all authority's been given to me. And then what he does is he shares some of that authority by saying, you will continue my work here on the planet.

Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. God has given us authority. And God has given us power.
The power of the Holy Spirit. You think about it. That early church were locked away, 120 of them, barely a decent congregation, locked away in a room somewhere in Jerusalem, told to wait.
They were fearful. And then, on that blessed day, the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fell upon them. And they went from being frightened disciples to being fearless disciples, many of whom were prepared to lose their lives for the sake of Christ and his church, his congregation.
So my first point is this, you know, let's understand what empowerment is and let's understand that the Holy Spirit has empowered all of us. The second thing I want to say to you is, there's a great danger.
[8:10] I mean, I love reading the Acts of the Apostles. I love reading that kind of narrative account of what went on in the early church. And I think there is a small danger in the church today that we kind of glorify the early church as if it was a problem-free zone as compared to today when we seem to have endless problems, many of them created by ourselves.

And the glorification of the church, the idea that somehow they had no problem but we've got plenty, is not actually backed up by the text, is it?
In Acts chapter 6, very early on, very early on, I mean, maybe within two years of Jesus ascending into heaven, what do we read?
We read that there was a horrific danger of a massive ethnic divide in the church. The Greek-speaking widows felt that they were not getting their share of the daily collection, which was called the daily distribution.
Interestingly, the early church was more interested in collecting money to share with people who had very little. Then many of our churches think today with their grand buildings to maintain and all that stuff.
[9:39] In the early church, it was a bit different. But here is a potential ethnic divide that could have split the church down the middle from almost day one.

Could have wrecked it. So the disciples come up with a plan. They look, this is, you know, this is standard operational duty that we need to deal with.
So they chose, that we're told they chose six men. Here's my text. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit.
They didn't send him off to some selection conference for two days to meet with people they never met in their lives who would pass an opinion as to whether he was called to leadership.
No. They had one and one criterion only. This was a man full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit.
[10:42] And I want you to notice something really profound. That this man had a remarkable life.

A remarkable life. It says that he performed many signs and wonders. But note this, the man who started his ministry full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit.
at the end of his ministry when the crowd around him picked up rocks to lob at his head it said Stephen full of the Spirit prayed for them.
Anybody in the house think that that kind of model is something that we should be aiming for but I don't know about you. My problem is God has filled me with the Holy Spirit but damn it, I leak.
I need constant replenishing. And I think I may not be the only person in the house who needs that.
So I want to talk to you about Stephen, this man who is such a model of spirit-filled existence.

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[12:02] And I want to say three things about that. actually, these are not things that kind of fit into the sexy model of ministry. These are what I would call the hard yards of fullness of the Holy Spirit.

You see, I think if there's a danger that we glorify the early church by pretending it had no problems, there is a kind of added attraction for us.
fullness. And that is we're interested in the kind of fullness of the Spirit that leads to what you might call the more exuberant gifts of the Spirit.
So, three things. The first thing about Stephen is this. He shows us that fullness serves. fullness serves.
At the beginning of his ministry, this man showed his willingness to serve by giving the most mundane job in the church of counting the collection and distributing it.
[13:16] Apologies to the treasurer. Given the most mundane job and showed a willingness to serve before he showed a willingness to undertake the ministry that God had given him.

And by the way, if you think that being filled with the Holy Spirit means that you will have a happy ending, just remember, Stephen's unbelievable ministry ended in his death.
Terrible, violent, brutal death. fullness serves. Jesus said in Mark chapter 10 and verse 45, the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.
You are bought, if you are a Christian, bought by the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. Nothing you did saved you, and everything that God did save you.
In Philippians chapter 2, the great apostle St. Paul tells us that we should have the same attitude of Christ Jesus, who never wanted equality with God while he was on planet earth, but became obedient, even obedient unto death.
[14:46] in chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles, right at the end of the chapter there, we read something of the life of the early church. This is what fullness serving looks like.

These people, we're told, were prepared to sell their possessions and create money in order that they could give it to the people who had nothing. You know, I was thinking of preaching this, thinking, what could I sell so I could just say, I do this.
But everything I thought about selling, I decided I didn't want to. Fullness serves. Stephen got that.
And friends, I don't know how many people there are in church this morning, but this church can always use more volunteers. Always use people who, when God speaks to them, say yes and not yes but.
I mean, it is a challenge in most churches to get the kind of quotient up of people who are prepared to serve in the church.
[16:06] Explained this to you before, the 80-20 rule. 80% of the people just sit back and treat Christianity as a spectator sport.

20% get involved. Incidentally, apropos Alex and Neville's message at the beginning of the service, 20% of the giving in most churches, sorry, 80% of the giving is supplied by 20% of the people.
I went around the diocese I served telling people, if you can break that statistic, you really start to make a difference. Fullness serves. It may not be sexy to say that, but that's a mark of the fullness in the life of Stephen.
The second thing is, fullness speaks. you remember there were these people from the synagogue of the freed men. I mean, they sound like they were deep in bondage when you read about what they think.
But these people started accusing Stephen. But, the scripture says they could not stand against the wisdom with which he spoke.
[17:21] I think every preacher secretly hopes that. but Stephen had it in spades. Fullness speaks.

You remember in Acts chapter 4 that there was another terrible crisis for the church while we're on the subject of the problems of the early church. And the problem was the Sanhedrin, the council of the top theologians in Jerusalem, sent to Peter, you are not to speak any longer in the name of Jesus Christ.
I mean, imagine if the disciples, the apostles had taken any notice of that. You imagine it because we wouldn't be sitting here this morning. I reckon if they stopped preaching in the name of Jesus Christ, then what would have happened would be that Christianity would have died the death of a kind of weird sect of Judaism in the temple courts.
I don't think, I don't think that we would have survived that. And what happens? Peter goes back, Peter and John go back, tell the disciples, this is what we've been told.

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They didn't pitch themselves as victims and go around, you know, miserable. They said they prayed together. And it says this, the Holy Spirit came upon them.
[18:54] And at the end of the prayer meeting, the building shook. You know, I know that architects get jumpy about this and health and safety people, but the bottom line is I long for the church to be shaken today, shaken by the Holy Spirit.

Am I on my own? Someone say no. Oh my goodness, hey. Listen to me. What does it say then? All of them, not just the apostles, all of them went out and spoke the word of God boldly. Let me ask you something, friend.
When was the last time you spoke about God boldly when you weren't in church? I mean, for some of you, a Christian might be, when did you speak of him boldly when you were in church?
Foolness speaks. And Stephen shows us what that looks like. You're saying, well, I'd love to speak more, but I'm scared that somebody might ask me a question that I couldn't answer.
[20:01] You know what the Bible says? In a situation where you're under pressure, who will give you the words to say? The Holy Spirit. If you step out, you'll be surprised how God will use even you.

I take the view that God used Balaam's ass, so there's hope for all of us. Fullness serves, fullness speaks, and finally, fullness shines.
it's said that when Stephen was defending the faith to these people in the synagogue of the freedmen, his face shone like that of an angel.
You don't see much of that in today's church, do you? I have seen it. I was freshly converted, probably only been converted about a month, when the man who was about to be my best man, took me to Rome.
It was his birthday present, and he asked his mum and dad, can Mike and I go to Rome and go to the Focolare movement conference? I had never heard of the Focolare movement.
[21:23] I asked him, what is the Focolare movement? He said, it's a Roman Catholic renewal movement. I didn't know what Roman Catholics were, and I didn't know what a renewal movement was, but I liked him, and so we went.

It was amazing, and the Focolare movement was headed up by this amazing woman called Chiara Lubert, and I swear, when she spoke to the attendees at this conference, we had to listen by simultaneous translation, because I don't understand too much Italian.
Well, she spoke. I swear her face shone like that of an angel, and then I got a message, she didn't ask me direct, I got a message saying, would you mind giving your testimony to like 4,000 people? I mean, I've been converted about a month, stood up there, my knees were knocking, I was frightened I might vomit or faint, and I told how God had broken into my life a moron and saved me from the consequences of my wrongdoing and set me on a new course in life.
She then sent me a message saying, and would you like to meet the Pope? I didn't seem gracious to say, well, I'm not keen, you know.
[23:10] So I did go and it turned out it was what they call something, a minor audience or something like that. So there were about a dozen of us, young people from the, and we met with the Holy Father and he blessed us in Latin and we all went home.

Stephen's face, shone like that of an angel. And the one thing that you see in that narrative about Stephen is there was something different about this guy.
Wasn't anything special about him, I don't think, but there was something amazing about him. He lived in Christ the most amazing life.
He did signs and he did wonders. He defended the faith against hostile people from the synagogue of the freedmen. He gave it all he got and in the end he gave his life.
You know, your heart stops when you think about that. He gave his life. I remember during the Vietnam War there was one of those big demonstrations at one of the universities out there and somebody had a placard and the placard said war isn't worth dying for.
[24:47] And I think in general many of us would agree with that. But Charles Colson saw that placard. Charles Colson who got put in prison over the Watergate thing and then became a Christian in prison wrote the most marvelous books before he died obviously.

And Charles Colson saw that placard and he wrote this book. What is worth dying for today? See, I ask you that question.

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What do you think is worth dying for today? I mean maybe you have some cause that I don't know about that you think, you know, I'd be prepared to go and get killed for this but Stephen got killed for no other reason than he was a brilliant disciple of Jesus Christ.
And he didn't just die. He wasn't lying in a bed with tubes coming out of every orifice deeply sedated. He was alive.
And they threw rocks at him and they killed him. not knowing that in Stephen's death there would be a resurrection and Stephen would be even more alive than he was on earth in heaven.
[26:16] I've talked to you about the hard yards of the fullness of the Spirit. See, I think a servant heart doesn't just begin when you decide to volunteer for a few things.

I think it starts in here. When you realize that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. When you realize that Paul the Apostle says your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus. Fullness speaks. Acts chapter 1 and verse 8 will tell you, you're a witness. You might not be an evangelist, you might not be a budding Billy Graham or Sarah Graham, whatever.
But you've got a tongue in your head and hopefully a faith in your heart and a spirit that's giving you the opportunity day by day to say something.
I hesitate to say this but I think there are some of us who have had a kind of self-awareness bypass and when it comes to witness it's very unnatural.
[27:46] We somehow try and force it into a conversation and it feels not quite right. I'm not talking about that. I'm not talking about Christians who have Bibles the size of a paving slab who are going to beat you around the head with it until you submit.

I'm talking about you. I'm talking about you waking up every day and praying to God, how can I serve you today? I'm talking about you waking up and saying to God, how can I speak for you today?
And fullness shines. I often wonder, myself, never mind anybody else, but what would happen if a Martian landed on planet Earth and looked at those of us who attend church on a Sunday?
How different would we look than the rest of the world? How different? My friend Graham Tomlin wrote his book, The Provocative Church, and one of the things he was keen to stress in that was that our very lives should be provocative.
They should leave others with questions about why is Harry like that? Why is Mary like that? And that would give us the opportunity to say something.
[29:20] I love Stephen, and when I get to heaven, I'm going to look up his postcode, and I'm going to go around and visit with him, and I'm going to say, well done, because you taught me something that I needed to learn.

You taught me something I wasn't even desperate to learn. but you taught it to me, and I noticed that the life you had meant that you started your ministry in the fullness of the Spirit, and you ended it full of the Holy Spirit.
And I want to be like that. And if you don't want to be like that, I suggest you go and speak to a Christian counselor or something. But if you want that, if you want that level of consistency, if you want to be a serving, speaking, shining Christian, I'm going to pray for you now.
Let's bow our heads. I'm going to leave a few minutes quiet, and in that quiet, I'm praying that the Holy Spirit is going to whisper in your ear, and if he needs to, he's going to shout that you might decide in the light of God's word, what next for me?
God's gracious father, we know that you have filled us with the spirit that day we gave our lives to you, but Lord, we also know the truth.
[31:29] Many of us have leaked, and Lord, we're aware that living on the spiritual experience of yesteryear can sometimes not be healthy.

As Isaiah put it, our spiritual experience fades like the leaves in winter. Lord, we don't want to be faded Christians.
We don't want to be leaking Christians, and we long to pray to you now that you would send your Holy Spirit upon your people gathered. Lord, we pray that you would shake this church, and Lord, that we might become serving, speaking, shining Christians, Lord, whose lives are earthed in your word, and truly empowered by your Holy Spirit.
and so, Lord, we thank you for Stephen's story, and we pray, Lord, that it might be a passion for us as we seek to live the spiritual life that you have for us.
Lord, we pray this now, and the people who agreed said together, Amen. Amen. Amen.

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[33:03]

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