



BUILD CHARACTER

STAY CONNECTED

THE CARNIVAL

The young boy stands in the midst of the carnival's chaos. A bag of cotton candy dangles from one hand, a string of tickets from the other. Prospective thrills beckon him to every stand, every ride, and every game. His eyes are wide with excitement. He races through the maze of people. His time is limited. He doesn't want to miss a bit of it.

He tosses rings at the ring toss. He hopes to win a bear. Close, but not quite.

He races to the merry-go-round. He hopes to ride the blue one. Purple will do.

He throws balls to dunk the clown. Three balls per ticket. Four tickets burned.

The carnival is fun, but it is frustrating. The fun drives him on. The frustration leaves him lonely. As he races to the next thrill, he hears a voice cutting through the chaos.

He stops.

The voice is familiar. Even more, the voice is wanted.

It wasn't wanted at first. At first he wanted to run free, to run alone. But the reality of the carnival changed all that. Now he welcomes the voice. He can't quite place the direction, but he hears it again. To his frustration, blaring bells from a ride beside him drown the voice out.

Where is he? Was that him? I think it was him.

He turns.

Through the crowd before him, he thinks he catches a glimpse of him. The crowd shifts, and his view is obstructed.

Was that him? I think it was him.

He stops and listens. Rather than the hundreds of voices around him he listens to the one familiar voice calling his name.

It is not loud; it need not be. It's a trusted voice that cuts through the chaos.

To his surprise, he does not discover the voice by running to the distant corners of the carnival. The voice is found as the boy stops and listens.

He pauses and looks to the towering presence standing calmly right beside him.

There he is. That's my dad!

THE CONSTANT PRESENCE

A familiar voice is powerful. It need not be the loudest voice in the room; familiarity beats volume. The wise know this. They listen for the quiet truth in that voice they've grown to recognize: "My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

When Jesus physically walked this earth, there was a critical moment when he pulled his closest followers aside. The cross was imminent. In a matter of days, circumstances would change dramatically. These followers had lived closely with Jesus for several years. They walked side by side; they shared meals; they slept in the same fields, the same rooms.

Which makes one of Jesus' final statements to them either desperately odd or powerfully intriguing. He said, *"It is for your good that I am going away"* (John 16:7).

Good? What could be better than having the face-to-face interaction they had with Jesus every day? If they had questions, they turned and asked him. If they were sick, they could walk across the room and experience his touch. How could it be *good* that he would be leaving them?

Jesus explained, *"Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you"* (John 16:7).

This must have caused confusion.

What counselor? If you're sending someone else, most certainly this counselor can't be better than you. How can it be good to get this counselor? You seem to be implying that this will be a better situation than the one we have right now. That's not possible.

As stunning as that sounds, that is precisely what Jesus was saying. He would leave, and his leaving would be good because having the Counselor present would be better for them than his own physical presence. It would take time for his closest followers to be convinced. In time, though, they would discover what we can still discover today: *A spiritual presence is a constant presence not limited by physical realities.*

When Jesus walked closely with his followers, he would also have times of absence. He was a physical being and willingly limited himself by this. Scripture describes times when, to his disciples' frustration, he slipped away: *"Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!'"* (Mark 1:36-37).

Such is the reality of the physical world; but the Counselor would be Spirit.

After the cross and resurrection, Jesus again met with his followers. Prior to his ascension, he made a statement that, here again, must have sounded odd at first. Later they would look back on this statement and piece it together. He tells them, *"I am with you always, to the very end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20).

This Jesus, this being who died and then rose, now promises his perpetual presence. But wasn't it the Counselor who would be the one who would be present? How is Christ to be present until *the very end of the age*?

This Counselor, this ever-present Spirit, would later be referred to as *the "Spirit of Jesus."* In one such place, an early follower of Christ wrote, *"I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what happened to me will turn out for my deliverance"* (Philippians 1:18-19).

The young boy at the carnival is not emboldened by finding detailed instructions on how to navigate the carnival. He did not find a map, or list of rules. Boldness for his battle is embodied in a person stronger, wiser, and more experienced than himself. Release from



his fear comes when his father, leaning down, whispers, *“I’ll stay close. Stay close to me. We’ll do this together.”* The memory he will savor most as he ages in life will not just be the carnival itself, but the person with whom he experienced the carnival.

And so it is with the Spirit of Jesus. God’s method is not to just download Scripture to your mental hard drive, sit back, fold his arms, and wonder if you’ll make the cut. Rather, he comes within us, strengthens us, leads us, and interacts with us. He wants to do this life, this carnival, together. And here as well, the memory we will savor for all eternity will not just be the carnival itself, but the person with whom we experienced the carnival.

If we are to authentically know and love God and experience his transformation in our daily lives, then we must lean into the presence of God’s Spirit. We must learn to discern the voice of truth calling through the carnival of chaos.

How does this work? How do we truly live by the Spirit? How do we experience God’s presence? How do we hear God’s voice?

Let’s get after the essentials.

THE PERSONALITY OF CHRIST

As a starting point, we must recognize that this Spirit is not an inanimate *force* or *energy* in the universe, but a *personality*. Yes, it has force. Yes, it has energy. But, it is not an “it”; it is a *person*. The implications of this are profound. We are not just pulled along by a colossal magnet. The Spirit of Jesus is not a cosmic hit of super-charged caffeine. We are inspired and strengthened by the presence of a powerful and personal being with emotion, perspective, and presence. This Spirit *“searches all things, even the deep things of God”* (1 Corinthians 2:10). This Spirit *“helps us in our weakness”* (Romans 8:26). This Spirit *“prays for God’s people in accordance with God’s will”* (Romans 8:27). This is a living personality that interacts and intercedes.

One of the more fascinating statements on this comes from a man who walked with Jesus physically. John was one of Christ’s closest followers. He is referred to as *“the disciple whom Jesus loved”* (John 13:23). Without question, this was a man who would have treasured the physical presence of Jesus. He sat with him at dinner. He walked with him, and later, along with the other disciples, he is referred to as Christ’s friend (John 15:15). This man knew Jesus well.

Years later, John writes to followers of Christ who did not experience Jesus’ physical presence. He draws attention to the physical experience he and others were fortunate enough to have when he writes that Christ is the one *“whom we have heard, whom we have seen with our eyes, whom we have looked at and our hands have touched”* (1 John 1:1). Why would he say this? It’s as if he’s rubbing in the fact that they weren’t there. Won’t his readers hear him saying, *“You missed him! He was here, and you missed him! Let me tell you what he was like, since you missed him!”*? We might expect this. It’s the kind of gloating common in our world. John does something quite surprising though.

When John writes, he writes with a stated purpose. So as to be certain nobody misses this, he tells them plainly that his purpose in writing is to *“proclaim to you what we have*



seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3-4).

You catch that? It’s stunning!

John writes about what was “*seen and heard*” (the physical presence of Jesus), so that “*you also may have fellowship with us*” (the spiritual presence of Jesus). So as to be certain there is no mistaking what he means by this fellowship, he describes it in detail: “*Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.*”

His fellowship is an ongoing fellowship. He’s so passionate that we too experience this that he tells us next, “*We write this to make our joy complete*” (1 John 1:4). It’s as if he’s saying, “*Yes, I experienced him, but so can you! You must know this! It’s not too late! You didn’t miss him! He’s still here and longs to fellowship with you! We are called to relate to a being, a person, who once walked physically and now offers his perpetual presence spiritually.*”

If there is a spiritual fellowship available to us, how do we experience this fellowship? How do we get the Holy Spirit? How do we both discern and recognize his presence in our lives? Even more, how are we to recognize God’s voice through the many competing voices that surround us? How do we know it’s God?

ASK

Scripture gives not only important guidance but a powerful promise.

*And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?
(Luke 11:9-12)*

This promise regarding prayer is often taken out of context and does more to frustrate prayer than to inspire it. “I asked for a pony,” the young girl says, “and I didn’t get it.” She’s confused because it sure seems like a good and reasonable request. But would it be good for her if God answered “Yes” to her every “pony request.” Every parent knows better. This promise for answered prayer is not a vending machine promise, where if we put money in we’ll get whatever we select.

But what is the promise? Clearly it is a promise that God wants what is best for us, and if we ask, he will respond with what’s best. What’s missed in this context, though, is the very last line of this teaching, which mentions explicitly asking for the Holy Spirit: “*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 to those who ask him*” (Luke 11:13).

This named promise for the Holy Spirit is profound. If a child asks for a pony, it may or may not be best to actually give the pony, but it will always be best to give the Holy Spirit. There isn’t a scenario where God would respond to this request by saying, “I know you’d really like the Holy Spirit, but I have a better plan for you that you’ll understand later.” There could be no better plan. Any alternate plan would be inferior.



The starting point for experiencing the Holy Spirit in our lives is to simply ask God for the Holy Spirit. Jesus teaches us to do so.

SEEK

Once we ask for the Holy Spirit, the natural tendency is to then demand something unusual to happen. We want proof! We want to know God really is present with us. We want him to do something we couldn't explain any other way. Although understandable, this is a mistake, and it sets us up for disappointment.

Experience of the Holy Spirit is not unlike the experience of a new friend. Our experience of that friend grows over time. Initially, there's an introduction. In time, there's a conversation. Much later, there are shared experiences and possibly even adventure together. When we ask God for his Holy Spirit, ironically, this ask is evidence that the Holy Spirit has already been active in our lives. The Spirit has brought us to Jesus and is leading and teaching us even though we may not have recognized this as God's Spirit.

It's for this reason that Scripture exhorts us to be "*filled with the Holy Spirit*" (Ephesians 5:18). In another place we are taught to "*come near to God and he will come near to you*" (James 4:8). As we seek God and his Spirit we will increase our experience of his presence, just like we increase our experience of any friendship the more we pursue that friendship.

In speaking of our interaction with God, Scripture tells us, "*Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known*" (1 Corinthians 13:12). If interaction with the Spirit of God seems simultaneously real and mysterious, then the experience is an accurate reflection of the experience described by Scripture. This could be misunderstood. Scripture does not tell us to set a low expectation of our experience with God and minimize his presence in our lives. Rather, the experience of God's presence can be both powerful and profound. But if we don't allow this experience to grow over time, we may miss the very powerful and real experience of God's Spirit genuinely available to those who both ask and seek.

Once we do this—we ask and we seek—we then understandably wonder, *How do we recognize the Spirit in our lives?* This leads to the important concept of *discerning God's Spirit*.

DISCERN

The young child at the carnival knows his father's voice because it is a voice he has heard countless times. He recognizes the voice in the midst of hundreds of competing calls because this is a voice he has heard for years. It is at this place where we lean into our experience with *Scripture*.

Scripture trains the ears. Those who train their ears by hearing God's voice through Scripture are much more capable of hearing God's voice in their life experiences. In the midst of the carnival's chaos, the young boy may hear the booming voice of another grown man. The pitch may be similar. It may get his attention for a brief moment, but



very quickly he will dismiss it. *“That’s not my dad...that’s not what he sounds like.”* We may not yet experience God face to face. We may be in a season where we *“know in part.”* But through Scripture we are given example after example, life after life, story after story, familiarizing us with the heart and passion of God.

A second tool for discerning the Spirit of God in our lives is *community*. It is critical that we surround ourselves with others who are also experiencing the presence of God. Their experience serves the incredibly important purpose of balancing and refining our own experience. *“Yes!”* the friend says, *“I affirm what you’re sensing. I, too, am convinced God is doing that in your life.”* Or *“Slow down, friend, I see why you may think that, but I sense caution; you may be a few steps ahead of God at this point.”*

Scripture puts an incredibly high premium on the collective agreement of God’s people. It goes as far as saying, *“If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them”* (Matthew 18:19-20). Two or three followers of Christ will refine each other and purify each other’s understanding of God’s presence in their lives. Their going before God together will be greater than the assumptions they make alone.

Pause

The carnival of chaos bellows with noise and confusion. Which leads to another critical aspect of living by God’s Spirit.

We must pause.

We must stop.

We must stand in the midst of the chaos and listen.

Proverbs reminds us, *“It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way”* (Proverbs 19:2).

Psalms reminds us to *“be still, and know that I am God”* (Psalm 46:10).

Ecclesiastes tells us to *“not be quick with your mouth, nor hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few”* (Ecclesiastes 5:2).

Yes, there is a time and a place to kick it into high gear. But when that time is *all* the time, and when that place is *every* place, we run the dangerous risk of getting swept into the chaos of the carnival rather than experiencing God’s presence in the midst of the swirling realities around us. We will establish greater awareness as we cultivate a contented spirit, with ears tuned to hear God’s voice. God can and will speak in any moment. Many of these moments can and will occur as we are moving swiftly through life. But this does not mean that our internal rhythm must match our external haste.

KEEP STEP

The young boy and his father begin to walk. The chaos swirls around them, but the cadence of the boy’s steps now matches the long but adjusted strides of his father. While once the boy was running frantically to and fro, now he walks with steady intention. The



father gently guides him. In one place, he affirms the son's excitement for the thrill of one of the rides. In another place, he encourages the son to step out, even though the boy is scared. In still another, the father encourages the son to wait. A few more inches of growth will give him what he needs for that one. Through it all, the son experiences a critical lesson: To make the most of the carnival, it's best to walk with his father.

Scripture puts it like this: *"Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit"* (Galatians 5:25).

Imagine how this might positively impact the boy's character. When alone, he runs frantically through the carnival. This frantic disposition leads to selfishness, impatience, and anger. Once with his dad, though, he is able to relax. Yes, there are times his dad holds him back, and this frustrates him, but as his trust in his dad increases, his experience of the carnival is one of greater peace, greater joy, and greater kindness.

It's no wonder, then, that when Scripture exhorts us to *"keep in step with the Spirit,"* that it's this very same passage that we get a description of fruit of the Spirit. *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"* (Galatians 5:22-23).

The greatest evidence that we walking with God's Spirit is the fruit of the Spirit ever-increasing in our lives. The impatient become patient. The harsh become gentle. The bitter become forgiving. It's for these reasons we must take this seriously. Staying connected to God's Spirit is not just a matter of gaining important counsel in our lives, this impacts the very essence of who we are. When our disposition changes, we relate better both to others and to ourselves.

THE WISE

In closing, consider a simple observation:

The foolish scream. The wise whisper.

Scripture says as much: *"The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools"* (Ecclesiastes 9:17). Wisdom has intrinsic weight that does not need volume. Foolishness needs help to be convincing. Wisdom is believed by the quality of the message. Foolishness needs the shout of the messenger.

With this in mind, consider Elijah's interaction and discernment of the voice of God in his own life.

The Lord said to Elijah, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

(1 Kings 19:11-13)



The Spirit of God is not a shouter. He need not be. The wise will learn, though, to listen for his quiet but powerful presence. When we do so, we will ever-increasingly be transformed into the people we genuinely want to be. We need not do this carnival of chaos alone. There is a divine presence who waits for us to ask, seek, and listen for his guidance.

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