

I'm not going to say that Paul was in the habit of using bad language. But someone told me recently over a cup of coffee that in the Philippians 3 passage where (according to our new translations) he referred to his high-born, holy-boy heritage as "filth" or "rubbish," the King James Version might have been closer to his sentiment when it used the word "dung."

Or perhaps a word that means the same thing but that preachers don't say from the pulpit.

Again, I don't know. But even if Paul did hold back a little to keep from offending his readers' sensitivities—even if he didn't use a crude term to describe his pre-Damascus Road righteousness—it wouldn't have been untrue had he said it. Left to ourselves, without the benefit of God's Spirit in our lives, our best days really are rubbish. And even after we're saved, anything we try to do without him or against him is sure to stink to high heaven.

"The Spirit is the one who gives life," Jesus said. "The flesh doesn't help at all" (John 6:63). So we'd better learn to let him take over.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:7-9, 12-18

The Old Testament has some really great stuff in it. That "Daniel in the Lions' Den" story alone is enough to make you want to start praying three times a day in your kitchen. So just for a minute, let yourself be carried along down a stream of consciousness, remembering things like the burning bush, the morning manna, the boy Samuel hopping out of bed at night, King Solomon praying at the temple dedication.

Great stories. Good memories. God in action.

To see him loving a nation of quick-to-complainers, shepherding them through whole centuries of trauma and turmoil and their own hot and cold temperaments, the picture we get of his covenant with Israel is rich in both color and content. Queen Esther. Nehemiah on border patrol. The Twenty-Third Psalm.

But "if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness overflows with even more glory" (1 Corinthians 3:9). If you think Moses marching down the mountain with the tables of law under his arm is impressive (you've seen Charlton Heston), then try to imagine what God is accomplishing in our world this very minute and see if it's not also epic in nature.

Medical missionaries treating AIDS patients in Africa. Accomplished musicians playing to huge crowds and giving God every note of praise. Soldiers conducting Bible studies in Islam's backyard. Prayer partners holding hands and wiping away tears around a suburban dining room table. Great and small. Grand and in miniature.

The Spirit is making this thing more special by the moment.

Life For The Taking

Because of the Holy Spirit, we are still today living in biblical times and able to experience God at work all around us—renewing us, restoring us, rejuvenating us.

Because of him, we have hope. I don't care what you're dealing with right now, how searing the pain, how black the prognosis. God's Holy Spirit is alive in you and prepared to be your full day's supply.

Because of him, we have life. We don't have to count up how much praying we've done this month, hoping it's been enough to satisfy God's appetite. We don't have to wonder if that one extra biscuit we ate for breakfast has irritated him into silence. We don't have to perform our disciplines as if we're taking medicine, every hour on the hour, concerned that one little bobble might bring on his wrath.

Because of him, we have freedom. And just because this liberty remains subject to abuse—with all the selfishness and deceit still floating around inside us—this doesn't mean we should be wary about embracing it. That's what the Spirit is for—to turn us loose, to set us free, to unhinge us from having to make grades and keep score.

Actually, this freedom was always available to God's people. His desire was never to set up a department for sacrifice enforcement. "If I were hungry, I would not tell you," he said to those who worshipped him by ounces and measuring spoons. "Sacrifice a thank offering to God and pay your vows to the Most High" (Psalm 50:12, 14)—not because you must but because you can.

So, let's ask ourselves—we who live this side of the cross, who have the Spirit poured out on us in full measure—are we living in his freedom today? Are we walking in his hope? Are we accessing the life he's bursting to give us?

Zoom, Zoom

We can. Jesus did.

When he offered himself to the Father, freely releasing his rights and privileges for a grander purpose, he found his courage "through the eternal Spirit" (Hebrews 9:14). When he busted back through the thorny hedgerows of death, leading a train of captives from bondage to blessing, he did it "according to the Spirit of holiness" (Romans 1:4).

And that selfsame Spirit is planted deep inside you today, a dynamo with enough energy and enthusiasm swirling inside to make a NASCAR race look like grandmas in Scooter chairs.

If you've been down in the dumps lately, you can stay there if you want to. But you don't have to because renewal and refreshment are less than a whisper away.

2 Corinthians 3:8 "How will the ministry of the Spirit not be even more glorious?"

Think of what we now possess by means of the Spirit of Christ. Why is this not always interesting to us?

2 Corinthians 3:12 "Having such a hope, we use great boldness."

Hope. Boldness. In what ways do you see these traits active in those believers whom you most look up to and admire?

2 Corinthians 3:16 "Whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is removed."

Do you see "the veil" at work in today's world? In what ways do you sense it still impinging on your own life?

The Spirit renews, restores, and refreshes. Before we can experience the Spirit's ongoing newness, we need to remember just how rotten and stale our oldness really is. But armed with such emptiness, we believers in Christ are in the best shape of our lives to be encouraged, optimistic, and fully at rest with what the Spirit is doing in us. It's a freshness you can feel from toenail to fingertip.

Holy Spirit, all I do is mess things up. How I need your help, your refreshing, your encouragement.